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Cover by James B. Settles depicting the "Ship Of Jupiter."

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SHIP OF JUPITER

By MORRIS J. STEELE

The ocean-going vessel of Jupiter must sail in a sea of viscous, heavy oil, sticky and clogging. Ordinary propellers would fail.

(See cover painting)

JUPITER'S mean diameter is 86,500 miles, which is very nearly eleven times that of Earth. It has a mass of 316 times that of Earth. However, its density is less than one fourth that of our world, but exactly equal to that of the sun. On Jupiter a surface gravity pull of $2 \frac{2}{3}$ that of Earth exists, but it varies as much as twenty percent between equator and poles due to its rapid rotation. Some astronomers hold that it is almost entirely a liquid planet.

If this is so, then the planet is composed of huge oceans of a liquid which is almost an oil, or a thin gluey composition. Ordinary ships, like those of Earth, would be unable to move in its thick, syrupy ooze. Also, a ship of comparable size would be nearly three times as heavy. However, due to the density of the ocean, it would probably ride just as high, but would be forced to fight against an additional frictional drag.

Let's picture a ship of Jupiter. First, it would be as sleek and streamlined as possible to permit it to slide through the "water" with as much ease as possible. Deep draft ships would be impossible, since such ships would be immovably lodged in the viscosity of the liquid.

Rather, the bottoms of the ships would be more or less sled-like, to permit them to slide over the surface. However, because this surface is so sticky, a propelling force which would "grip" sufficiently to move the ship would of necessity either "dig" deeply into the water, or "hite" into a comparably broader surface.

The only mechanism which could accomplish this wide "surface push" would be a continuous revolving screw almost as long as the ship itself. And because we cannot have a deep draft, this screw would be located on the side of the ship, at the surface, rather than underneath, at the center.

In turn, this would necessitate not one screw, but two; one on the other side, turning in an opposite direction, to provide maneuverability. Otherwise, the ship would proceed helplessly in a circle which might almost be tight enough to be called a spin on one spot.

Such screws would necessitate a motive force which could only be provided by tremendously powerful motors, which would mean tremendous weight. Since everything on Jupiter weighs nearly three times what it would on Earth, this immediately increases the mass of the ship.

Because of this fact, ships on Jupiter could

not be built beyond a certain maximum size determined by the balance between power and mass. A small ship would be too small to carry any cargo, and a large ship would be impossible to move because of its very weight.

Thus, the ship is a medium-size ship which takes into its make-up a hair-line calculation of ratios and factors.

For the purpose of speculation, we should assume that Jupiter power plants are more efficient than on Earth, and put out more energy per pound than our own marine engines do. Thus, we can picture a Jupiterian ship of a size comparable to our own ocean-going light freighters.

Thus, we have a ship perhaps 250 feet long and weighing about 18,000 tons (compared to a 7,000 ton Earth freighter).

It would, in spite of its weight, carry a bulk of freight only one-third that of the Earth ship, and its speed would be not more than six knots per hour. Long hauls on Jupiter would take many months, and the sailor of this vast world must grow accustomed to long voyages and long periods of inactivity, since storms on his world would not result in the wave motion we experience here. In fact, most of the time, the ocean would be as calm and smooth as a mirror.

During a storm the ship would head into the wind, and ride it out, its sleek sides shedding the wind. However, if it got sideways to the wind, which because of the density on Jupiter would possess a terrific force, it would roll slowly like a harrel, entirely covered by a covering of viscous oily stuff many feet in thickness. In this event, the Jupiterian crew would smother to death for lack of air, if the storm lasted any time at all.

In such an advent, the motors controlling one screw of the ship would be shut off, and the other screw would then serve to hite into the sea on each roll, and restore it to its original direction into the wind.

Then, in order to right the ship, which has no real heavy side which would automatically right itself, a small propeller, at right angles to the screws, located at the narrow part of the stern, might turn the ship, inches at a time, until it rode properly on its sled-like bottom.

The Jupiterian ship is constructed entirely of metal, of the strongest kind available on the planet. It has to be able to "take it"!



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INTRUDERS from the STARS

By Ross Rocklynne

IN A planet that is far from Earth—how far away we dare not guess—the wooden slopes of the Valley of Kopeljin were alive with the dreadful sounds and radiances of battle. Dreadful to her who, at the rear of her armies, sought only, in her great, consuming rage, to save face, to avenge the ignominy done by those who had brought about her downfall.

But:

"Retreat!" she screamed. "Men! Why do you tarry when your mistress needs you? Retreat to the Knob, for this is the end of our empire!"

The end of empire indeed! Oh, the long, glorious months when Bess-Istra,

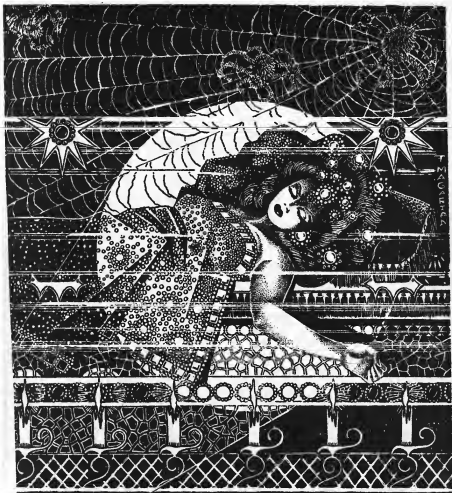
the lowly, spat-upon slave-girl, sat on the throne of the planet, held its peoples in thrall!

Oh, the long, glorious reign that was ended when the prime minister, who sat at her right hand, turned against her, betrayed her, harried her, hurled her own armies against her, drove her back inch by inch, until she stood here with her dying loyalists around her, with their blood staining her arms and face.

The end of empire!

The tears of a scalding rage furrowed the grime of her face. The remnants of her legions were beating their way up through the wooded slopes of the Valley of Kopeljin—beating their way up and





**Earth lay helpless and supine before
this lovely, evil woman from beyond the
stars. Was there no way to defeat her?**

dying without grandeur as the limitless forces of the enemy hurled balls of green, acid fire into their hopelessly depleted ranks; dying, as explosive lead pellets monotonously, chatteringly issued from the high chalk cliff to the right; dying, as enemy pilots, stretched out on their tiny, down-swooping gliders, vengefully dropped pill-size pellets from the night-darkened sky; dying as the pale, colorless, fan-shaped radiance of a monstrous beam fluffed across the width of the valley, fatally touching only those who did not carry the protecting *bik*—touching them and shriveling them slowly to nothingness; dying—but with the name of Bess-Istra on their lips!

Bess-Istra! She had flared for one moment, like a swift-dying nova! But the people of this planet would not soon forget her, would long remember her after she was gone, and their remembrances would be the remembrances of—*fear!*

She choked back her rage, her grief, to fondle that thought. She had left her imprint—aye! And now she would go!

"Retreat!" she screamed down into the bowl-shaped depression where the last of her men held a feeble line. "To the Knob! All is over! Bess-Istra commands you to follow after her, to guard her, to escort her to the Citadel where she shall make her escape!"

Most came, scrambling up the hill toward her; a few remained behind with a cannon-ray projector, to guard the retreat. Bess-Istra would never see them again, nor they her. But they were content, for to a man they worshipped her, looked upon her very footprints as hallowed ground, though she had plunged a planet into rivers of blood, out of her own selfish passions.

Her chief officer moved behind her with long, gaunt stride as she swiftly

followed a precipitous path. Before her, two soldiers hacked away the obtruding branches of the waxy trees, so that her way might be without hindrance or discomfort. And so they finally came to the base of the Knob, the great, immeasurably thick dome of natural iron ore which capped this hill, and whose interior formed—the Citadel

BESS-ISTRA stopped, her breasts heaving. She made a motion to her chief officer.

"The valve, Bandro! Quick!"

Bandro stepped forward on the moist, leafy ground, his long slim fingers sweeping camouflaging weeds from the broad, man-size valve which would give entrance to the Citadel. While he worked at the complex lock with sure, delicate touch, his impassive, gray-seeming face turned toward Bess-Istra.

"We could yet make a truce, Mistress Bess; by that path at least we would retain life. By the other, we invite death."

She struck him across the face—savagely.

"You dare suggest it!" she cried.

"You, Bandro, whom I trust! You would have me humble myself to him who deceived me! Let me not hear of this again."

Bandro stood rock still, gray eyes lidded and concealing his emotions and his thoughts; his love for this girl at that moment turning into hate.

He turned woodenly back to the valve, worked on it for precious moments. Bess-Istra faced affrightedly into the backward distance, hearing the dreadful sounds of an annihilating battle, knowing that her thousands of remaining men were shriveling away under the awful weapons being turned against them.

"Quick! Oh, quick!"

"The valve opens, my lady," said Bandro.

And indeed it did, just as the pale ray across the valley began to walk across the ground toward Bess-Istra and the hundred loyalists who surrounded her. They had no protection against that ray, they had no *biks*. But once they were in the Citadel, there were few man-made forces that could rout them out or harm them within the space of several days. And by that time, Bess-Istra and those of her empire who loved her would be gone.

Bandro now led the way down through the palely lighted corridor. One of Bess-Istra's lieutenants stood at the mouth of the tunnel, gathering in the remnants of the army, screaming at them above the furious cacophonies of battle. The valve would remain open as long as there was the mere chance of rescuing one of Bess-Istra's men. Then it would be closed—and though the might of the enemy was hurled against it, they would not destroy that impregnable door. The only way they could get through would be to utterly wreck and annihilate the Knob itself; then it would be too late.

They came into the great central room of the Citadel without fanfare. One of Bess-Istra's mechanics came quietly to her.

"You have need of the ship, then, Mistress Bess?"

"Our very lives depend on it now. And the ship is prepared for its long journey into the deeps of space?"

"Another day will see us prepared."

"Good. It shall be a day of rest. I am weary to death, and my men are weary also." She turned to Bandro, who stood to her right, regarding her impassively from his darkly mottled eyes; stood with his billowing cape tossed loosely over his arm, the blood-red scimitar, symbol of Bess-Istra's

short-lived reign, on his swelling, powerful chest. But impassive though he was she sensed his deep hostility.

Her glorious, scarlet lips curled now. "I know your thoughts," she whispered. "You think that I have but dragged you with me into a death-trap. You curse the day your lot was ever cast with mine."

EMOTION at last touched his gray skin, quivered the nostrils of his straight nose. His voice quivered also, but so deeply that one could almost count the separate vibrations.

"I gave up life and love and family that I might at last taste power—that I might feel in me the strength of millions of men as they did my will."

He sucked a lip-shivering breath through his teeth; his chest rose and fell quickly. He ground out, speaking under only the greatest restraint, "And now what have I? What? A rat-hole to dwell in for awhile, while the enemy pounds from outside—and a space-ship to be dumped into, to be gassed, to sleep for uncounted years—and not even to know on what barren celestial flotsam I shall crash to my end, along with her who is responsible for my fate."

"You presume!" she cried, white with fury. Her hand dropped to the deadly spastic-gun at her curving hip. "Mark you, Bandro, I would as lief kill you as not—"

"As you have killed others for as little reason," Bandro shot out. The wild expression of utter panic now crossed his face like wildfire. "A truce!" he suddenly cried, so that dozens of those near heard him. "A truce! Demand of Bess-Istra that she makes a truce with the enemy. Aye, and for what reason does she not? Because she knows that, though we who have supported her would be given leniency, *she* would die!

"But she is sending us into certain death. This dream of hers—this fantastic belief of hers that the escape ship will hurl through space for countless years, and land on a planet of her choosing—land *safely*! Will hurl through space, to land while we are lying in frozen sleep, unconscious of elapsed time. It is a mad dream, this plan of hers—"

Bandro never knew what hit him. He stiffened, stood stick-like for one shocked second. Then he knotted up, head between his legs, teeter-tottered a moment, then rolled to his side, where he lay quiet and unconscious, the muscles of his body straining to contract in unrelenting spasm.

Bess-Istra straightened from her savagely tigerish half-crouch. She sheathed the spastic-gun, in which tiny lights were dying. She laughed a harsh, unpleasant laugh.

"Fool!" she spat. She stepped forward, kicked the helpless man. Then she whirled, stood fork-legged, glaring at the dozen men who looked at her with sullen faces. She said no word, but held their eyes until the flush of shame stained their brows.

Bess-Istra laughed again. "And you are fools, too, for listening to Bandro's indictment and considering it! Know you not that I would not betray you?"

Under the bewitching angry languor of her glorious eyes they could not long maintain their sullenness. Their faces dropped. And Bess-Istra cried, "About your business then, soldiers! There is much loading of armament into the hulls of the escape ship to be done; armaments and munitions that will give us fair start in the conquest of another planet not far from here. Begone—and take this upstart Bandro with you and roll him into an empty corner of the ship. He is still a valuable man, and he will be grateful to me for tak-

ing him with me when we awake from our sleep."

So saying, Bess-Istra walked with supple, yet fatigued, stride to her quarters; but her brows were drawn down frowningly, sadly, over her barbarian eyes. An episode was drawing to a close, a golden day had turned to lead; she wanted but one thing, now, wanted it passionately—the neck of the man who had betrayed her between her fingers!

ONE day passed; one day being that length of time required for that far-distant planet to turn once on its axis.

The enemy harried the Citadel with the full outpouring of their frightful weapons. And finally, a bare few moments from the time that the great, armed escape ship was to be plummeted into the deeps of space, Bess-Istra was called to the television cubby, where the hard, yet war-weary, eyes of her arch-enemy bit into hers.

"I call you," he said wearily, "only because I have the good of my people in mind, Bess-Istra, I—"

She interrupted him. "Traitor! Beast whom I trusted! Would that I could but drive a dirk into your heart!" She made a savage, utterly unrestrained motion, came close to the television screen until it seemed that her blazing eyes would sear him. "Do not talk to me of the good of your people. Such words are but hypocritical mouthings. You seek the good of the people no more that did I—you seek only to flaunt your own power over them, for you yourself have felt the acid of lowly, ignominious beginnings!"

"Not true, Bess-Istra," he made sad answer, and on his weary face there was pity for her. "I have never been driven by selfish motives."

"What do you want of me, traitor?"

"Of you, Bess-Istra, I want only yourself. For all your tyranny, the tyranny which at last compelled me to betray you, the people could be swayed by you as by no other in all our history. They loved you, though you whipped them."

A muscle in his hard, drawn face twitched. There was pleading in his eyes. Unconsciously, he extended his hands in a pleading gesture.

"Forget this mad desire for power, Mistress Bess! Remember only of the great good you can do the people. This cruelty that you have so often shown is but an outward garment in which you clothe yourself. The cruel avenging, tyrannical Bess-Istra is not the true Bess-Istra. The true Bess-Istra is gentle, soft, merciful, feminine—a woman both lovable and admirable. Bess-Istra—return to my side and rule with me!"

Her lashes lowered over her glorious, gold-flecked eyes, her full lips writhed into a taunting yet voluptuous smile. "You love me, fool," she said huskily.

His shoulders fell. "Yes. But it is not for that reason alone that I wish you to return. It is because I know there is in you more good than evil. Bess-Istra—together we could rebuild a war-shattered world! Will you return?"

FOR a long moment she said nothing, savoring the hope that grew in his eyes with every moment of her hesitation. Then she burst into a wild, taunting laugh. She cried:

"No! That is my answer, my final answer. And I am glad that you asked me—glad that you love me—for now your torture at my refusal will be all the greater! Now, take your face from my sight forever!"

The muscles of his face slowly whitened. He said in a horrible voice, "I

am compelled to slay you and all those in your garrison, Bess-Istra."

Her hands were on her hips, her eyes widened in mock amazement. "Indeed! Know then, that when you destroy the Knob, and break into the Citadel, no soldier, and no Bess-Istra shall be found. The Citadel shall be an empty shell for no life shall be here."

He studied her with pain-shadowed eyes. His voice was flat.

"How?"

And she laughed again. "*How!* Now let that mystery torture you to the end of your days! Farewell!"

His face faded as she flipped the toggle switch—faded forever. And on Bess-Istra's face was only a look of gloating triumph. She could leave this planet now, knowing that in great measure she had avenged herself on the man who had caused her downfall.

She thought over what he had said concerning her softness, her inner gentleness. A dark sneer grew on her lips. The utter fool for thinking such obvious nonsense!

She sought out her chief mechanic. "Tell me, now. Is the ship ready for its long journey? Have the soldiers been loaded into their acceleration chambers? Does the ship bristle with those very weapons which harried us into our hole?"

"All ready and waiting your command, Mistress Bess."

She laughed joyously. "Then let us leave this planet forever. Relieve Bandro of his spastic slumbers, bind him in the acceleration chamber which his rank affords him; for if he were to undergo the Sleep with common soldiers, they would have no respect for him and so would be useless to me. Inform him that I forgive his loss of control—inform him that I graciously retain his as my second in command.

"Come now; there is no reason to

tarry longer. To the ship!"

Nor was there reason to tarry longer. The giant cylindrical ship was loaded with its thousand remaining soldiers of the army; with deadly weapons; with armaments and munitions. And its nose was shoved into the tube-runway that would give it exit from the Citadel—and from the planet.

Empire's end! But so certain was Bess-Istra that there was no fatal flaw in her fantastic plan, that she knew another empire, perhaps greater, lay beyond the vast sweeps of space the escape ship would take her. Another empire! A new empire for Bess-Istra, once the spat-upon slave-girl!

And so an era ended, the era of Bess-Istra upon that planet. Nevermore would she be seen there—nevermore! She was gone, gone so swiftly that no eye knew of her going—for the escape ship snapped away into open space much as a watermelon seed is flicked away when pressed between thumb and index finger.

Flicked away—immediately soared into tremendous, appalling speed—left that solar system under the guiding hand of the navigator—plunged headlong into the unimaginable emptiness of interstellar space—settled down to a steady, void-consuming pace—a pace it would continue, according to Bess-Istra's plan, for thirteen full years.

THE navigator, the brilliant scientist who had invented the first spaceship under the guidance of Bess-Istra, swung around on his chair, his too-bright eyes fixed on hers.

"It is done, Mistress Bess," he breathed. "My genius has succeeded in the most monumental calculation ever undertaken by mind of man. Though the next solar system lies a full light-year distant, though the planet which you and I have studied in detail

through the *tele-eye* travels on a complex orbit, the escape ship shall land there gently, safely, thirteen years from now! And we shall conquer that planet, vanquish its peoples!"

"Then—" said Bess-Istra "—then we are ready for—the Sleep! Oh, Sab-Hallo, you have done well indeed, and shall have a position of power under me. But tell me, Sab-Hallo. By what means shall the ship land with no hand to guide it?"

"You need not worry, Mistress Bess. Long before the ship lands, radio-echoes will let robot controls know how far away the planet is. The ship will brake its speed accordingly. And when the distance from the planet is zero, the ship's speed relative to the planet will be zero.

"Other instruments which measure the heat given off by those people we intend to conquer will make certain that the ship lands on an isolated spot.

"And as soon as the ship lands, a strategically placed lever will activate a mechanism which will dissipate the Sleep-gas, will provide normal air. Then we shall awaken, in full possession of our senses, ready to do battle."

Bess-Istra, in spite of herself, felt an inward shrinking sensation. Here in the control room, nothing but a transparent partition staved off vacuous space. Stars—stars in endless number, lonely, lonely! How deep was space; how bottomless and frightening.

"And," she whispered, "what if we should perchance miss our destined landing place, Sab-Hallo? Would we . . . die?"

"Die?" The thought was terrifying to the conceited Sab-Hallo. "No—no! I have made provisions. The Sleep-gas will last—forever! And some day the ship would land on another habitable planet, perhaps even in another solar system."

"It is good." She sighed. "But of course, we will land on the planet of our choosing, and to think otherwise is foolish. Come, Sab-Hallo, leave the controls—and let us pump the ship full of the Sleep-gas. . . ."

. . . And it was done! Soldiers drew the straps around themselves in response to the command that was issued. They breathed deep of the odorless vapor that soon filtered in from the ventilation ducts; breathed deep and slept.

Bandro, thoughts alive with his hatred of Bess-Istra, slept.

And Sab-Hallo, unafraid, pleased with himself, certain of the perfect operation of the many strange instruments which composed this ship, slept.

And Bess-Istra lay languidly on her couch in the observation room, her glorious, gold-flecked eyes surveying empty space. Soft, gentle, transparent straps held her to the couch, for there was no gravity.

There she lay, breathing deeply, no longer afraid of the star-dusted void, but rather admiring its chilling beauty. It was necessary that she should lie here in full view of that abyss. Necessary to abate the sense of loneliness, of wretched depression that now gripped her. There was something soothing, comforting in that velvet darkness. . . .

As soothing as the vapors which now were drawn into her lungs, and which now stole from every tiniest cell of her body any semblance of life; caused her lungs to cease breathing, her heart to stop, her blood to halt in its veins and arteries; her brain to stop thinking. This was—the Sleep.

And Bess-Istra—*slept!*

SLEPT for how long? Who knows?

Not for thirteen years, as she and Sab-Hallo had supposed. For the escape ship did not land on the planet at which it was aimed!

Did *not!* The scientists of that planet were wiser than Sab-Hallo had known. Wiser by infinitely more than most of the many races of the universe that bear the human form. And more peace loving. Those scientists had their own *tele-eye*, and with it they searched Bess-Istra's ship; searched it, knew its history, its terrible purpose—understood all this when the ship was a mere hundred million miles away.

And so from that planet which Bess-Istra thought to have conquered came a powerful beam of force which gently, unjarringly, grasped the escape ship; changed its course, ever so subtly; shunted it into a new path but slightly different from the old; guided it out of that solar system; sent it boring without change of speed out into interstellar space again. That planet would never be bothered by Bess-Istra.

And that path the ship took and kept—and would keep until, perchance, it should enter another solar system far removed from this one.

Then would it land automatically on another planet?

Who knew? Certainly not Bess-Istra, who slept with her lifeless face to the changing stars. . . .

And how long ago was this? When did all this happen?

Longer ago than any of us dares to think. . . .

CHAPTER I

"They Worship Another God!"

CRACK!

Crack!

Crack!

"Hey!"

The ejaculation was a roar of rage that shivered the dripping lianas snaking through the wet foliage of a mid-summer African jungle.

"Put down that rifle! Quit shooting at me! I'm no damned Jap!"

"Sorry, brother," an austere voice at last spoke from behind the banana plant. The gun was lowered. "The very lions of the jungles these days might be Japanese—who, I agree with you, are damned; damned, almost to the point where they are beyond redemption. However, had I hit you, you need not have been alarmed. The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away."

"Praise the Lord," gasped the thoroughly unnerved voice of Bill van Astor-Smythe, ace legman of the New York Corey Features Syndicate, "and spare the ammunition!"

He broke from his shelter in the ravine, his feet sinking ankle deep in the decaying humus of the Portuguese East African jungle. His black hair was in disarray, his khaki shorts and shirt torn and befouled with swamp mud and studded with tenacious burrs. Bloody thorn scratches made tit-tat-toe patterns on arms and thighs. To his bosom, as if it were purest gold, he clasped a portable typewriter, which, upon examination, would have proved to be vintage 1929. No matter! It worked and *any* typewriter that was available and that worked was a precious thing indeed in this year of 1944.

As he weaved across the clearing, he was grinning a cockeyed grin in spite of the evidence that an unfriendly jungle had mauled him around.

"Hip, hip, Reverend!" he yelled. "As I live and breathe, I'm glad to see a human being again! The incident is forgiven and forgotten. Which way to the mission and a juicy alligator steak? Boy! What wouldn't I give for a hot bath Astor-Smythe style. I'm lousy."

He tottered suddenly. He sat down on his portable, propping his dizzy head in his palms.

"Wow! Who'd have ever guessed those Japs would come along and riddle those poor British lads? Didn't have a chance, not one of them. I was in the rear of the British column and we were just an hour out from Lorenzo Marques when they ambushed us. Bet you anything I was the only one got off with a whole skin. . . . Damn! This is fierce!"

He had a pounding headache, nausea. He couldn't see straight. But suddenly the man who had shot at him was holding out a canteen and a quinine pill. Bill washed the pill down gratefully. After a few more dizzy moments he jumped up and weaved a circle around his typewriter.

"Boy! Hell! That's better. Fever's gone, but my head is ringing. Thanks!"

The kneeling man rose. He was dressed in shorts, too, but a ministerial closed collar was around his neck.

"Thank the Lord, brother; I am but His servant!" he intoned.

"Thank God, then! I'm a servant, too. I serve the press, a sort of god in its own right. Let me introduce myself, Reverend—you are a reverend, of course?"

"As the Lord maketh me, so am I."

"Okay, okay! But what's the handle?"

THE other's brows drew down over studious, serious eyes that couldn't have seen more years than Bill's twenty-six.

"Handle?" His lips broke into a puzzled, almost shy smile. He said softly. "Oh! I am the Reverend John Stevens—and this—"

He pointed to a nondescript, pinched-looking companion who now emerged from the jungle and stood near him.

"—and this is my assistant, Thomas Reynolds."

Bill grabbed Reynolds' hand.

"Pleased to meet you, Reynolds—and you, Johnny—er, Reverend." He also grabbed at Stevens' hand, dropped it hastily when he saw Stevens wince. "And I'm Bill van Astor-Smythe, of the snooty, snobby, nasty, nose-raising, blue-blooded van Astor-Smythes. Ain't—I mean isn't that something to live down? Boy, you should have seen the old man when I shipped myself off to England three years ago as a special war correspondent-on-trial for my syndicate."

The memory made him shout with joy, so that a half-dozen polychromatic parrots ceased their painful jargon and fluffed their wings with frightened squawks.

The Reverend John Stevens had cause for alarm, too. He closed his hand around Bill's arm, looked around affrightedly.

"Please—I beg you!"

"Eh?"

"Japanese! I have no way of knowing what inroads they have made into Mozambique, nor where the British front is laid down. But such an untoward sound as you have just made might draw them in this direction if a party of them were near."

"Yeah, yeah. Sorry. I see what you mean. Maybe we better get back to the mission, huh? You *have* got a mission, haven't you?"

"By the grace of God, yes. It is a little place, but I am able to say that the several hundred Bantus who live in this region have been converted to the true religion. That is—"

He paused. His eyes shifted worriedly, as if he were conscious of a sin he had committed. A sudden despair tugged at his lips. "That is, I believed until yesterday that they had been converted. Now it seems . . . doubtful. Yesterday morning, a great many candle holders and candles were missing from

the altar. I questioned my house-boy patiently and . . . and he broke down. He gave me no details, but I understand that my parishioners are—" he dropped his eyes hopelessly "—well, that they are worshipping another god of their own choosing."

"You don't say! The dirty heathens!"

"Oh, please don't condemn them, for they know not what they do. But . . . well, I am not on my way to the mission, as you suppose, but to the village where I understand the new idol has been erected."

He patted the Garand rifle which had given Bill van Astor-Smythe an uncomfortable few minutes. His lips, which had seemed pleasant only, and a little shy, now turned hard.

"And then I shall strike down the clay image which my straying sheep have raised in mockery of the true God." He raised his hand on high, and his blue eyes acquired an expression of terrible wrath, "The Lord our God," he cried, "is exceeding fearful when wickedness tarries in the breast, my children; he shall flay from thee the sins which I, and my father before me, have sought out and tried to destroy, verily—"

"*Cut!*" Bill van Astor-Smythe yelled. He was standing with his hands on his hips and grinning. As Stevens lowered his hand and blinked at him, Bill grinned. "That kind of junk is for the movies, pal! It's sob-sister stuff, see?"

"Sob-sister?" Stevens blinked. Then he got a woe-begone expression on his face, and all the religious rapture faded. His shoulders slumped. "I understand," he said unhappily. "The mission has been my home all my life, you see, and during the last five years—since my father died—" He stopped, gulping.

Bill looked at him with pity. "Sure, sure, I get it. You've been cooped up

here away from the world all your life, playing spiritual nurse-maid to a bunch of frizzy-headed Zulus. Well, pal, it looks like the end is in sight. Day after tomorrow, the Nips will be pad-padding through your jungle and making a GHQ out of your mosquito-proof parlor, Johnny."

STEVENS' dismay showed in his eyes. "Oh, not really!" he pleaded. "You mean that Mozambique will fall to the enemy? You mean to say the gallant Tommies won't hold their own?"

"I double-mean it." As carelessly as Bill spoke, his fists knotted, and sparks of anger showed in his narrowed eyes. "And not only that, Madagascar across Mozambique Channel is filthy all the way to the interior with Japanese batallions. It's the pay-off, the big blow-up—and the Allies are in a he—that is, a melluva hees."

Bill picked up his portable. "Come on! I'll help you play truant officer on the hooky players having truck with the old-time religion. Better give me another of those quinine pills, though. Da—darn! Wish I had a *kepi* to shunt this water down my back instead of my neck."

Bill was feeling a thousand times better as they forced their way through that dripping tropical forest. He was light of heart, cocky of tongue, and breezy of manner under normal conditions, and normal conditions for him were very close to a state of affairs which would madden most other people. Bill had sat on the chalk cliffs of Dover with a telescope and this very typewriter, as the hundreds of fishing smacks came beating across the Channel from Dunkirk loaded with their grimy soldiers. On the way from Bataan to Corregidor his typewriter keys had given the Jap shore batteries some tough competition—at least from the

standpoint of racket. And by plane to Australia he kept up the infernal noise. Only, the New York Corey-Features Syndicate did not consider his cabled news infernal. That syndicate smeared Bill's reportorial adventures all over the bottom of the front page of ninety daily newspapers throughout the land.

And from Australia to the Solomons, to the Aleutians; a stretch on Midway; some madness on the Libyan Desert, bouncing along in a tough American jeep bot on the heels of Rommel's African army; and from thence across the Mediterranean where the Allies were striking at Italy, the "soft belly of the Axis dragon."

Then new developments. The Suez-Red Sea route to the South Pacific was not yet safe for Allied shipping, and supply ships were making the long journey down around the tip of Africa—the Cape of Good Hope. Thence these supply ships were constrained to beat up along the East Coast, passing directly through Mozambique Channel, which was flanked on one side by Mozambique (Portuguese East Africa) and on the other by the island of Madagascar.

In Mozambique Channel, Axis submarines had sunk tons upon tons of Allied shipping, using Madagascar as a secret base. To prevent the Germans from taking over Madagascar from the neutral French, and thus controlling the sea route entirely, Britain had taken over the Island in 1942.

But Madagascar was only half the problem. Across the channel was Mozambique, which might at any time be seized from neutral Portugal by Germany, and which already harbored a Nazi consul who used his diplomatic immunity to cable Germany fatal information concerning Allied ship movements through the Channel.

Britain had completed the job by gaining Portugal's tacit assent to oc-

cupy Mozambique, also. They held the Portuguese possession for hardly more than a month when the Japs launched a simultaneous attack on both island and mainland.

And now, in midsummer of 1944, the Allied sea route around Africa was imperiled.

BILL VAN ASTOR-SMYTHE cheerfully explained all this to the Reverend John Stevens and his companion. Neither having been isolated, was apparently well-informed.

Stevens was leading the way, seeking out paths and short-cuts around and across swamps thick with mangroves.

"A boy scout, too!" Bill gasped admiringly. "You find your way around like a bush native, Johnny. Someday I'll do the same for you, maybe, along the complicated wilderness trails of li'l ol' New York. If the Nips don't get us—which they probably will."

Stevens said nothing; he kept on pushing ahead, his jaw righteously grim. Bill felt a flash of respect for the young missionary. Even though the Japs were bound to make things uncomfortable in a few short days, Stevens was going to disabuse his "prisoners" of the notion that there would be more than one true God.

Bill for the first time seriously considered this alleged new god. He was curious. What or who were the natives worshipping? Probably nothing very exciting, of course. Probably nothing at all. Stevens had merely heard a rumor which was just that, and nothing more. But still, perhaps Bill could get a story out of it. A half-dozen sticks of type, maybe. . . .

And so he was shocked when, with the gloom of falling night, they came to the edge of a glade and saw that which threw all of Bill's (and, indeed, all of

humanity's) smug beliefs in the uniqueness of the planet Earth into a cocked hat.

A space ship!

CHAPTER II

The Awakening

THE three men suddenly stopped in the concealing growth of wild maize on the edge of the oval-shaped glade. Stevens' breath drew through his teeth. His arm shot out, forced his two companions to their knees.

Bill gaped. Slow dizzy thoughts began to parade across his consciousness. The scene at which he looked was beyond the pale of common sense.

Hardly twenty feet away from him, seated cross-legged on the ground, were a half-dozen white-haired, fuzzy-headed Kaffirs. They were sitting in front of drums which were made by stretching antelope skins across hollowed-out tree trunks. The Kaffirs were moaning softly, weirdly, almost inaudibly. They swayed back and forth, while their fingers brushed at their drums and made a wild barbaric rhythm which Bill had to strain his ears to hear.

Their heads were raised toward the "god" they were keeping vigil over—a sleeping girl!

The girl was not all. There was the cylindrical-shaped ship. At least, Bill had the crazy feeling that it had to be a ship. It had only two portholes, and outside of that, no protruding features. But if it was a ship, it was no ordinary ship, for its incredibly hard-looking metal surface had a slight tinge of greenness, like the patina that covers ancient things. And though this patina was not extremely noticeable, Bill had the feeling that this ship was older than any man-made thing. *Perhaps older than man himself!*

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All this Bill took in with a mere glance. But the greater part of his attention was captured by the girl. His breath caught in his throat; there was in him an emotion that was like pain. He was lost in her compelling, other world beauty. She lay motionless, head resting on the glossy black pillow of her hair, a coverlet barely concealing the perfection of her body. Her eyes were closed. Her cheeks were tinged with the flush of life, her lips were scarlet as blood, set into a piquant, child-unhappy expression. But her breasts did not rise and fall. She might have been but a painting. She might have been merely a corpse—if Bill had not known instinctively that she was alive.

"No wonder," Bill heard himself saying in a low, crazily-wavering voice, "no wonder they think she's a goddess. Oh, Lord! I could worship her myself!"

"You do well to pray to your Lord," the Reverend John Stevens whispered, in acid *sotto voce*, "if such are your thoughts! What wickedness swells here? Who is this shameless creature? What is her purpose in stealing my converts?"

Bill felt a flash of irritation. "Boy! You sure take yourself seriously, don't you, Reverend? Shut up!"

Stevens' mouth opened and closed. He blinked and gulped. Reynolds, his assistant, said uncertainly, "See here, now—"

"See here—nothing!" Bill shunted himself a step closer to them, whispering fiercely. All his flippancy, his cocky acceptance of a dangerous situation, was gone. In its place was the deadly seriousness of a tough, quick-thinking reporter who sees a story beside which all other news stories pale to nothing.

"This is something that is bigger than you or me, Reverend Reynolds. And why? Because that girl is not a native of the planet Earth!"

"Not . . . not a native of . . . the planet Earth?" Stevens repeated the words in a tone of horror. Then his face grew very stern indeed. He leaped to his feet with a cry of anger. "Blasphemy!" he cried. "Impossible! My father taught me that God created Heaven and Earth and populated Earth with creatures made in his own image. Other planets are therefore lifeless, and the Lord did not intend man to travel between them."

THEN he apparently regretted his temper. The flame in his eyes died down. But he said sternly, "Do not interfere with my duty as a minister of the Gospel!"

And he whirled, and with long, plunging stride broke into the glade and confronted the drummers!

Bill van Astor-Smythe stood up, his hands on his hips in disgust. Talk about your fire-breathing sky-pilots! Here was one in the flesh. The drummers had leaped to their feet, gesticulating, jabbering wildly in the Kaffir tongue. But the Reverend John Stevens talked back at them, even more bombastically, and suddenly they began to cower, and then fell to their knees, their heads lowered. Bill heard them mumble meaningly, "OurfatherwhoartinHeaven—"

They went through the whole Lord's Prayer, and then, with wails of terror, ran into the jungle, apparently back toward their village. These oldsters were, Bill guessed, chosen solely to keep watch over the villagers' new object of worship when the tribal ceremonies did not include her.

"They realize their sin," Stevens said triumphantly. "Please come out, Mr. Astor-Smythe; Mr. Reynolds."

It was with a strange sense of eeriness that Bill stood in front of the space-ship, for such he knew it to be. The glorious creature who lay on a

couch in what must have been the observation booth of the ship was utterly oblivious of events—had been oblivious for how long? Bill shivered. The thick, glass-like material which sealed the girl in was scarred with long, white, gouged streaks, straight as a ruler—as if, perhaps, meteors moving at incredible speed had struck glancing blows, had left their marks. Inside, on the glass plate, were star-shaped hasps or locks which might have accommodated keys.

The girl was fairly visible, partly because of brightening moonlight, partly because of the rows of lighted candles in their candlesticks which had been placed on the ledge beneath the transparent partition beyond which she slept. Nonetheless, Stevens drew his flashlight, spot-lighted her upper body and head.

Stevens' voice was gloomy when he spoke. "A creature of evil and wickedness, verily; a temptress who, if she should wake, would be more dangerous than a serpent of the jungle."

Bill grinned. "Jxnay, fellows! Don't stare so hard at the young lady while she's in bed. It's unethical. Besides that, it ain't right!"

Thomas Reynolds flushed scarlet. His mouth fell in his confusion. "I was only trying—" he began in protest.

"We were trying to determine whether the—the creature really came from another planet," Stevens hastened to his aid. Stevens' own boyish cheeks were red.

Bill chuckled. "Save it, pals. I know what you were trying to determine—whether you'd have what it takes when she does wake. But never mind about cogitating too hard about whether she really came from another planet. Take one look at the ten-legged spider dozing in that web spun on the outside of the glass there. Hey! There's

a whole half-dozen of them!"

IT WAS true. The spiders, if spiders they could be called, had woven their strands across the glass-like material, anchoring them in the sharp corners where the glass-like material melted in the hard metal of the ship. But they were *ten-legged* spiders!

"See what I mean?" Bill demanded tensely. "You won't find any ten-legged spiders on Earth. Spiders are *arachnida*; they have eight legs by definition. That proves this ship came from another planet. Somehow, the eggs got caught in the corners of this window, endured the cold of space and then hatched when the sun struck them."

The beam Stevens held on the girl shook, as if the entire philosophy of his life were being rearranged. He desperately tried to grab at a straw. "That—that spider up there has eight le—" He stopped, biting at his lips when the "spider," as if in answer to the challenge, moved in its web, and stretched out two additional legs which had been hidden beneath its body. He faltered, unable longer to question the argument.

Bill took the facetiousness from his voice. "Play the beam around the other parts of the ship, Reverend— Hold it! There!"

A vast excitement rippled through Bill's breast. Suddenly he had dropped to one knee, dropping his portable.

"Look at this!" he yelled. "A lever of some kind! Hey, man!" He whistled. "And if it isn't the lever that will wake up this girl and—or open up the ship—"

"How do you know?" the missionary asked sharply. He and Reynolds had similarly dropped to their knees. In spite of themselves, they had been infected by Bill's excitement over a chance discovery.

"I don't know!"

Bill wrapped both hands around the foot-long bar of metal which protruded from the base of the ship—the only such protuberance to be seen anywhere.

"But I'm almost certain of it!" Bill continued vibrantly. "Look here! This isn't a lever so much as a plunger. It was designed to be pushed upward. When the ship landed, it would force this plunger upward. But the ship, by pure chance, rested its aft section on the limb of that fallen *baobab* tree there. The plunger was prevented from touching solid ground. It obviously didn't fulfill its function when the ship landed!"

The Reverend John Stevens flicked the beam over the plunger. He said slowly, "And perhaps it was a good thing it didn't, Mr. Astor-Smythe. I have a conviction about that girl in there, and it is not a pleasant conviction — *Don't do that!*"

"It's already done," Bill said in satisfaction. It had required no more than a steady upward pressure to slide the plunger out of sight into the belly of the ship.

Bill glanced sidewise at Stevens, grinning. He enjoyed the look of stricken uneasiness on the young missionary's face. Stevens, strangely, had an almost religious fear of the sleeping girl. How silly that was! Showed what happened to you when you were isolated from the rest of the world and had nothing but a Bible and a flock of Zulus to keep you company—

And it was at that moment that Bill heard the hissing sound! At that moment that he sensed terrible danger!

HIS eyes popped. Coming from invisible apertures in the hull of the ship he saw sudden streams of a yellowish vapor. He caught a whiff of it. It spread mortal terror through his soul as his brain went suddenly dizzy.

He leaped to his feet and back. He caught chaotic glimpses of Stevens and of his assistant, Reynolds. They had seen the gas too. Not only seen it, but—breathed it! They were tottering, staggering away from the ship, or trying to stagger away. But suddenly they fell on the ground.

Bill himself fell, futile, scalding curses leaping through his remaining thoughts. Stevens had been right. There was something hellish about this whole thing, about this ship, about this girl. Why had he ever had the bad sense to push that plunger up? It had obviously released a gas designed to slay any life near the ship! For Bill knew he was dying as he fell.

But as he fell, he saw the glorious sleeping creature stir—saw her limbs move in life—saw her lips part—saw her eyes open with awareness of an external world. He had been right. The plunger had been designed to wake her—and perhaps others of her kind within the ship! He groaned in abject horror of what he had done, and felt life slip away. . . .

CHAPTER III

Peace for the Planet Earth!

WHEN Bill van Astor-Smythe regained consciousness he knew with certainty that he was the captive of the people from the stars. He already was quite certain that the sleeping girl was not the only inhabitant of the ship. She would not have come alone.

Even as he lay there, his mind struggling out of its torpor, his bones like lead, he was reasoning his way out of confusion. Where had this ship come from? *Why?* Bill shuddered; for some reason he felt that if he had only listened to the Reverend John Stevens,

he could have averted a terrible catastrophe, which still lay in the future.

He did not regain full consciousness immediately. But for a lucid second, as through a blur, he saw three figures standing over him. Two were men, dressed in alien clothes. The third was the ravishingly beautiful sleeper who no longer slept. They were wearing strange helmets which looked like those used in football. Bill knew that such a helmet was on his own head, and on those of Stevens and Reynolds who lay on the floor of this room with him.

Between the helmets ran wires.

That Bill saw before he lost consciousness again. But he felt strange forces plucking at his brain . . . he felt his thoughts running with incredible swiftness over every memory of his life, and every forgotten memory, as if somebody were turning the phonograph of his mind at incredible speed.

Then he was awake—and being hauled to his feet!

"Men of the planet Earth!" an alien human holding a strange weapon snapped. "You will fall in between us! Mistress Bess will speak to you!"

Along with the dazed Reynolds and Stevens, Bill fell into line between two guards dressed in resplendent metal-braid uniforms. They were marched down an echoing corridor. They turned left into a lavishly draped room. And here sat Mistress Bess—the Sleeper!

Bill felt the same painful lump in his throat. She was so beautiful! Beautiful beyond the laws of nature.

They were brought to a standstill.

Studying them closely, the girl leaned forward, her brief silken costume span-gled with diadem jewels that clustered in her hair like bright galaxies strewn on ebony space.

"Leave me, guards!" she spoke suddenly. "I do not require protection from those who are my friends!" Her

hand came down as the guards bowed themselves out.

Mistress Bess smiled—smiled a voluptuous smile that was as kindly as it was subtly taunting. And suddenly, for no good reason, that smile enraged Bill.

His square jaw came out. "Friends? Like fun!" He snapped the words insultingly, his fists knotting. "If you call gassing us a friendly act, think again! Or maybe that's your idea of how to say 'hello, how are you' on your planet?"

He sneered.

Her eyes, gold-flecked, turned cold. She half rose on her chair. Then she sank back, apparently restraining herself.

"You speak rashly, handsome one," she spoke softly. But there was the sharpness of a razor beneath her voice. "But no matter. I am glad you have already ascertained that we have come from another planet. That is true. You must also realize that the gas which stole your consciousness was released entirely automatically, was designed only to protect us from hostile creatures when the ship landed, to awaken me and my officers and my thousand soldiers from their long long sleep."

"Soldiers?" Stevens was breathing hard. "And why do you bring soldiers to the planet of the Lord? Nay, do not answer! Already, the Lord my God has spoken the truth unto me." His arms flung up, and his voice was terrible as he fearlessly stepped toward the Mistress Bess.

He cried, "You are a scientific race, versed in the arts of the destruction of lives and property—and *you have come here to conquer the planet Earth!*"

THE cry rang through the gorgeously tapestried room, and for a moment it seemed to turn everybody into statues. Then Bill yelped in hopeless

disgust, "Oh, *nuts!* Come back here, you dam—you blankety fool!"

He stepped forward, grabbed the African sky-pilot's arm, and pulled him back. He turned to Mistress Bess.

"Sorry, Mistress Bess. He—ah—he knows not what he does—oh, criminy, he's got me doing it, too! I mean, he's got a fantastic streak a mile wide—and not a magazine stand within three hundred miles! I don't think you're any angel and I don't feel as if you're my bosom friend, see?—but I've got sense enough to know that nobody's going to try to conquer any planet with an army of a thousand men and only one measly ship! Sorry he blew up."

Her eyes were narrowed, and Bill thought he saw the trace of an ironic smile. He frowned—but at that moment the door opened. Into the room stepped the two men whom Bill vaguely remembered having seen just before he regained complete consciousness.

The taller of the two broke into a rapid, harsh flow of language. Mistress Bess spoke sharply.

"Speak in English, Bandro! These are . . . our friends."

The crescent eyebrows of him called Bandro shot up. There was a demoralized expression about his mouth. It was evident that some discovery had shocked him.

The smaller, stockier man at his side broke into less excited speech. "It is of no great importance Mistress Bess," he snapped. "Bandro is unduly alarmed, even though we entirely missed the planet for which we started!"

"*What?*" The girl cried the word out in shocked unbelief. "But . . . but yourself told me that there were no other solar systems with many light-years—hundreds, perhaps. That . . . that means that we have slept for—" dread drew the rosiness away from her cheeks—"for how long?"

The other's voice was somber. "Longer than we dare to think, my lady. But what matter? To us it was but the fraction of a moment. We closed our eyes and opened them as the plunger dissipated the gases in the ship. And the ship fulfilled its purpose. It has landed us, safely, on a planet populated by beings of our own calibre—beings whom we can—"

"Stop!" She cut him off. She was breathing heavily, her face ghastly. "No matter. It is as you say. We must thank our gods for guiding us to safety on a livable planet—"

"There is only one true God! You foul creatures of the devil—"

"Shut up!" Bill swung Stevens around again, his eyes blazing. "Get hold of yourself, you—"

"I cannot stand by and see my religion blasphemed," Stevens cried excitedly. "This—"

She who called herself Bess-Istra leaped to her feet. "Stop!" she cried sharply. "Will you have us throw you in chains, fool? I am not of a mind to tarry when there is work to be done—when there is a great need to be met!"

SUDDENLY a soft slyness tugged at her lips. She left the dais on which she sat, her bare, golden legs moving with silken stride. She stopped when a few feet removed from the three men. Reynolds, who had been standing a little behind his superior, had been staring with hypnotic fascination at Bess-Istra from the moment they had come into the room. Bill felt much the same, only worse. There was something about this girl which rang warning gongs in his brain, but at the same time she made him experience an emotion that was overwhelming—and frightening.

She said huskily to the Reverend John Stevens, "You wrong us when you infer that we could intend the conquest

of your planet—a planet where a God named the Lord rules. No! Our purpose is different—our purpose is kindly!”

“What—” The man named Bandro spoke sharply, but cut himself off, his mottled dark eyes suddenly lidding.

“Yes!” spoke Bess-Istra. Her breath came more quickly. “You know, men of the planet Earth, that we are now speaking your language. Does this seem like magic to you? It is not. By means of an instrument which we, in our language, call the *vothet*, but which is a great deal like the hypnobioscope invented years ago by one of your countrymen, we were able to transfer from your subconscious minds much detailed information.”

Bill remembered the helmets. “Yes,” he nodded. “You learned the language that way, then?”

“Learned,” she said, “not only the language, but also much about the planet Earth. For instance the nations of your planet are at war, are they not?”

Bill’s mind was brought back suddenly to a remembrance of the conscienceless hordes of Nazis and Nipponese who were bringing misery and ghastly destruction to the world.

She added softly, “And the Allied nations of your world have their backs to the wall, are fighting a hopeless battle, are they not? In the Pacific the Japanese are throttling you. In Italy, the Nazis are about to trap Allied armies. Your cause is well-nigh lost! In another few months, the democratic nations of the world will be at the mercy of beasts! It is true?”

And Bill knew it was true! Few men dared to believe that it was true. They fought on, refusing to believe they were already doomed. But this girl, from out of the depths of space, could look at the whole picture without pre-

judice. She knew! And she—

He drew his breath in suddenly. A startled thought swept across his mind.

“You mean—?” he cried.

“Yes!” The glorious face of Bess-Istra seemed transfigured with an inner glow.

“Men of Earth,” she cried, her voice a clarion peal, “*we who have come from space are going to stop the war and spread peace and contentment throughout the world!*”

CHAPTER IV

“—Besieged Isle of Madagascari!”

TO STOP the war!

The thought seized at the innermost cells of Bill’s brain. He grew dizzy with it.

He was not a sentimental sort of person. He had deliberately hardened himself to witnessing misery and death in their worst forms. The possibility that these mysterious people from the stars, with their super-science, could bring to an end the conflict scouring the world free of every decent human thought, awoke in him a choking hope.

Did she mean it? Could she mean it? Or were her words a mockery? Was she truly the devilish creature that the young missionary thought her; that Bill thought her? No! To have the hope withdrawn would be too much to bear.

Bill swiftly looked at the other occupants of the room. He whom Bess-Istra called Bandro stood fork-legged, face impassive, but with his eyes lidding his secret thoughts. Near him stood the shorter, stockier being with the glittering eyes; he was looking at Bess-Istra, lips curled in a vain, meaningless smirk. The Reverend John Stevens’ jaw was hanging; but it was Stevens who broke the pulsing silence.

The zeal of his religion was in his

eyes. Somehow he was standing straighter, somehow his eyes were flashing with a godly fire. But this time, Bill was thankful to see, no austere dogmatic cry erupted from his throat. Instead, there an humble dignity to his words.

"Miss Bess," he said humbly, "if I have offended you with my suspicions, I pray your indulgence. But I was wrong—wrong! I had thought you to be the devil's own, but this offer of yours, to free the world from a desperate, horrible tyranny — well, the thought can have originated in none but a good and true mind. I—"

Her gold-flecked eyes were gazing at him oddly. "Good and true?" Her eyes brooded, narrowed, as if she were struggling with a thought that stunned her.

"Yes, yes! For after all, and I quote: 'He who loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love his God whom he hath not seen?' Miss Bess, we are all children of God, though we worship him under other names; and so now, if your intentions are indeed what you say, I throw open my heart to you, I give you my love—"

"Ixnay on the ovelay!" Bill van Astor-Smythe sang out. He was grinning. "Cut it out, parson! What he means, Miss Bess, is that your offer to save the world for Roosevelt and Churchill rings the bell with all of us! And how!"

His excitement overrode any restraint he might have had in the presence of a beautiful girl.

"You mean you actually could do it? Slap down the ears of those dirty yellow streaks? Drive Hitler and his bunch back to the last front?"

BESS-ISTRA still looked at Stevens, at his boyish, radiant face, his eager blue eyes; still looked at him, as

if his words lingered in her mind. Then she returned her attention to Bill. She studied him. She began to smile. She threw an amused look at Bandro and the other.

"Speak to him, Sab-Hallo. Tell him of what we could do."

The stocky, broadshouldered man known as Sab-Hallo smirked. He addressed Bill, his glittering, self-pleased eyes holding Bill's as if in contempt.

"The *vothet*, the machine which taught us your language and something of your world, gave us a general picture of the war which is being waged on this planet. It is a devastating war, of course, but nothing to what we on our planet—"

"Sab-Hallo!" Bess-Istra spoke.

He bit at his tongue and cringed a little. He said humbly, "I was merely about to remark that on our planet, although we excelled in the arts of peace, our science was such that we had great and marvelous weapons stored away in secret places. These weapons we have brought with us in our epochal flight across the void. They are weapons besides which your artillery and bullet-throwing guns are as nothing; your airplanes, your battleships, your tank, your deadliest gases and bombs—these are children's toys. On this impervious, practically indestructible ship which I, Sab-Hallo, have constructed, we have weapons which can level whole armies."

"Yes." Bess-Istra took up the tale smoothly. "As we shall level and destroy the armies of those who menace the freedom of your world—"

"No!" Stevens cried the single denial, pleading in his voice. His arms extended. "Miss Bess, we must not! If we are going to bring salvation to the world, can we not do it peacefully, bloodlessly? For if we bring the peace we cannot do it through hate. Justice is the Lord's!"

"Hold everything," Bill interposed swiftly. "Back down, Johnny! You don't look gift horses in the mouth—"

And Bess-Istra interrupted him, her eyes wide on Stevens and his outstretched hands. "Stay!" she commanded. She spoke musingly, "Yes, it can be done. Why—why, a bloodless victory!" The thought seemed to stun her.

He who was known as Bandro strode forward, his heavy metal-braid sleeves slapping against his smoothly muscled arms.

"But—but, Mistress Bess!" he burst out in what seemed like anger. "This has never been your manner—"

She faced him. Her lip curled. "Quiet, Bandro," she exclaimed. She smiled, tawnily, voluptuously, and her eyes lidded. "After all," she said in a softer, more yielding tone, "are not these our friends? Do we not desire to please them?"

For a long moment he returned her gaze. Then his anger dissipated and he strode woodenly back to his place.

"Very well," he spoke at last, into the silence that settled. His lips curled into a peculiarly crooked smile which made Bill shiver. "Do as you wish, my lady," he murmured, and there was a slight sarcastic tone to the words. "You have ever chosen to amuse yourself by strange means."

SHE whirled toward him, and the double-lensed pistol at her side was in her hand and directed toward him. "Mark you, Bandro!" she cried in a tone of rage. "Once before you stood against me—but I reinstated you, made you my second in command; forgave you. But your insolence cannot longer be brooked. Will you stand in the way of this great—ah—mission which I seek to undertake for the . . . the good of our fellow men?"

Bandro stood still, faint contempt in his eyes.

She sheathed her weapon with a sliding clatter. "See to it then!"

Abruptly, all passion was gone from her face. Bill made a mental note that here was a girl who might appreciate a good punch to the jaw at the opportune moment. Damned if he'd ever let her pull a gun on him! But in the meantime it might be more to the point to play along with her.

He kept his thoughts to himself, as Bess-Istra turned to him, her full scarlet lips pursed with what Bill knew was deliberate coquetry. Knowing it didn't seem to be any antidote. His heart beat painfully. And she must have guessed the emotions in his breast, for a half taunting light grew in her glorious, lidded eyes.

He said huskily, with just the shade of counteracting insolence that was necessary to set her back a trifle on her heels, "Okay, Bess! Where do we go from here? We've got a world to save! And every minute we stand here making with the gab somebody dies that shouldn't have to."

Her mouth tightened imperceptibly, but she immediately regained her balance.

"We begin where you, Bill van Astor-Smythe, say," she said coolly. "The *vothet*, as you may guess, is not powerful enough to cause all the information we drew from your brains to be impressed on our brains. The complete picture of world events is not before us. But you, being a—a reporter?—you would know of such things. Command me then, O Bill. To which battle-front shall we proceed—and shall we destroy, or merely render our enemy helpless?"

The Reverend John Stevens' eyes were shining with a godly joy. He grasped Bill's arm.

"Brother," he cried, "good tidings at

last sweep across the world. Peace and good will toward men is at last to be a reality. Praise the Loord! And may I make a suggestion?"

Bill was faced with a staggering decision. Where to start on this impossibly monumental task? "Go ahead," he invited dazedly.

"As a trial action," Stevens said glowingly, "why not save Madagascar and Mozambique from the damned Japanese?"

The idea caught in Bill's brain like tinder. He snapped his fingers. "Swell!" he cried. He whirled on the voicelessly watching girl, paying no attention to the ironic mirth in her barbaric, gold-flecked eyes; nor to the enigmatic half-smiles of Sal-Hallo and Bandro. He began to talk in rapid staccato fashion, outlining the plan that had come to him.

Across Bess-Istra's face flashed respect. "You would make a good strategist on my own planet," she murmured speculatively.

"You had wars on your own planet then?" Bill demanded, eyelids flicking upward, in the beginnings of startlement.

She momentarily seemed to bite at her lip. She said easily, "No . . . no, of course not. Many thousands of years ago, O Bill, there were terrible wars. But in the era in which I lived all was peace and prosperity, and men loved each other."

SHE flirted a casual look at Stevens.

Stevens was so excited, Bill thought, that he would very likely blow a cylinder if some steam wasn't let off. This was his dish. An angel had come from Heaven who sorrowed for the woes of men and was magically empowered to put a stop to it.

Bill felt a faint thrust of alarm, momentarily. Something—what was it?—didn't seem quite right. Oh, nuts! His

touch of malaria was making him nervous.

Bess-Istra now turned with a silky motion toward Sab-Hallo.

"The ship is ready to lift, all my soldiers are awake, and have eaten, and are ready to stand at their posts to receive orders to operate their weapons should we have need of them."

"All can be made ready within a few of those Earth units of time called the minute. But the only weapons we will need to accomplish our task are those I shall operate from the control room, Mistress Bess."

"Good!" Bess-Istra drew a sharp breath. Her eyes sparkled with an excitement that had suddenly drenched the very air. "Are we ready? Then to the control room, Sab-Hallo! Lift the ship out over the great sea which Bill says is to the east—and find the Japanese supply fleet which is at this moment sailing with munitions and reinforcements toward the beleaguered isle of Madagascar!"

*

CHAPTER V

Soft Belly of the Axis Dragon

"THERE it is!"

Bill was sitting in an acceleration chair, part of a semicircle of people who leaned backward and looked up at a broad white view-screen, which showed a perfect picture of the cobalt, white-capped ocean spread out below.

The ship, a mere thirty minutes ago, had leaped up into the sky with a tremendous burst of speed. And there was no acceleration! One hardly knew one was moving, for the acceleration chairs created an etheric field which robbed each atom of an accelerating body of its inertia.

Seated in the semi-circle were Bess-Istra, Bandro, the Reverend John Stev-

ens, and Bill van Astor-Smythe.

Thomas Reynolds had pleaded of his superior to be allowed to go back to the mission. He was a simple soul, and confessed that these strangely alien people frightened him. Stevens was glad to let him go, for the mission needed someone to tend it. Reynolds left the ship before it left the ground.

Bill was pointing to a fan-shaped area of white-caps now. It was miles below, but it was certainly the wake churned up by the Japanese fleet.

The space-ship plunged down out of the stratosphere toward its goal. Excitement plucked at Bill's nerves, sent the blood singing through his veins. Could these people actually do what they claimed to do? It seemed impossible!

He glanced sidewise at Bess-Istra. Her scarlet lips were parted with the same excitement Bill felt. She was watching the growing fleet with interest. Bill saw clumsy cargo ships with deep wells and thick funnels. There must have been a dozen of them, loaded with packing cases which were filled with enough munitions to keep the Japs on Madagascar and Mozambique going; would keep them supplied until the Allies surrendered.

The ships were closely bunched. Except for two destroyers they were traveling without convoy.

But as the space-ship dropped toward the fleet, there were signs of action. Sailors on deck went mad. And suddenly from each of the ships came flashes of fire and an appalling racket like continuous summer thunder. They were firing two-inch shells!

At the same time, the convoying destroyers stepped up their paces a notch, and from their funnels poured thick streams of smoke! At the same time the destroyers erupted with anti-aircraft fire.

Bill winced, knowing that no ship could stand up under that withering fire. But Sab-Hallo suddenly burst into a titter of delight.

"Pitiful!" he cried. "They think to harm my wonderful ship—seek to harm the ship which even fierce-driven meteors could not damage. The fools—the useless fools! Mistress Bess, say the word, and I shall show them the might of our planet—shall utterly destroy and sink their fleet with one blow!"

She bent on him a cold, withering glance. "Do so and it will be your lot to join them. Render them helpless and drifting—it is all I require."

Bandro now turned in his chair with the motion of a panther. He spoke in a low fierce tone, the dark furrows of a vast impatience over his brow. "Why should we spare them, Mistress Bess? They are trouble makers! They and their nation must be completely negated before our—before the plan can succeed! Before the peace can be consummated. Was it ever your manner—"

"It is my manner now!" She spoke slowly, as if puzzling over something. Then she shrugged. She smiled a hard, peculiar smile and snapped at Sab-Hallo: "Drop closer! Spew their ships from stem to sterns with the golden disks. At once, for there are things to do and this is a larger world even than that one from which we came."

"It is good, my lady," muttered Sab-Hallo, sullenly.

His deft long fingers touched at a control sequence on the console board—and Bill saw a beautiful sight!

GOLDEN disks, thousands of them, spinning rapidly, fell from the belly of the space-ship, swiftly approached the cargo ship directly beneath them. Bill heard the missionary give a cry of unbelief as those golden

disks spun through the decks and disappeared; touched at the chattering guns and seemed to be sucked into the metal of the guns.

And those chattering machine guns, which threw two-inch shells with incredible rapidity, ceased their fire—*jammed!* And at the same time acquired a brilliant golden glow.

And then the cargo ship, aswarm with panic-stricken Japs, began to lose headway. Smoke ceased to pour from its funnels. It lost speed.

But by that time, the space-ship had darted toward another Japanese craft, straight into its futile anti-aircraft fire. Again the golden disks spun rapidly downward—and again! Within five minutes after the space-ship had attacked, the Japanese weapons were entirely silenced, and the whole fleet was an aimless flotilla of flotsam!

A fleet unable to move under its own power!

"And Madagascar is two hundred miles away!" cried Stevens, pounding his fist exultantly, yet softly, restrainedly, on the arm of his acceleration chair. "Oh, this is indeed a great day for man!"

"But—but how did it work?" Bill cried, amazed. "Bess—Mistress Bess or whatever—"

She shrugged carelessly. "It was nothing. The golden disks were but magnetic force-fields which had an affinity for metal. They act as staples which bind the moving parts of a machine together so tightly that no force can sunder them. The Japanese fleet will float helplessly until after we have made the peace!"

"And when the Japs discover that those men and supplies they needed aren't coming through they'll know they can't keep on fighting," Bill breathed joyously. "They'll retrench, try to consolidate their gains. The Tommies

will follow them up and back them to pieces. Wow!"

He suddenly let out a yell that made Bandro leap to his feet with a curse that turned Stevens' face red, even though the curse was made in another tongue.

"Where's my typewriter? *I've got a deadline to meet!*"

Deadline!

And Bill van Astor-Smythe, legman extraordinary for the New York Corey Features Syndicate, made that deadline—and a hundred more infinitely more important.

Scoop after scoop! Scoops for which any journalist would give thirty of the ripest years of his life!

Bess-Istra, the glorious mystery girl from the stars, had smiled with indulgent patience at Bill that day after he yelled for his typewriter.

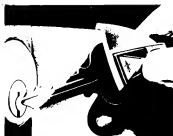
"Of course," she said smoothly. "You will want to let your people know what is happening. So be it! Bandro, lead our great friend Bill to a room where he can be uninterrupted."

AS BILL went away with Bandro, Stevens was talking with Bess-Istra, quoting eager reams of Biblical quotations, his face on fire. And Bess-Istra was listening with complete attention, an odd, thoughtful expression in her eyes.

Bandro turned with his hand on the knob of the door of the room to which he had brought Bill. A curious malevolence was naked on his face.

"I wish to give you a warping, friend Bill," he said when he had Bill's attention. "Do not look with too bold an eye on her who is known as Bess-Istra!"

Bill put his hands on his hips. "Hands off, eh!" he snapped. "Sez who? You haven't got a lease on the pretty maiden, have you?"



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Voice From A Star

by William P. McGivern

JOE EVANS was a normal, bright young man with all the standard qualifications for being happy. He had a girl whom he thought was lovely, he had a job that paid him adequately, and he was twenty-six years old.

But he wasn't happy.

The job was one reason. He was a copy writer for a Los Angeles department store and, in spite of the money, the job gave him a pain in the neck.

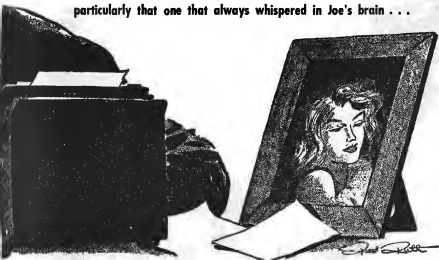
He was thinking about this as he sat in the office he shared with Cliff Nesser, watching the sun sink into the horizon. He decided rather abruptly that along with his job he didn't like California either. Everything looked as if it were built to impress a producer.

Even the sun couldn't set normally and unobtrusively, the way it did in Kansas and Illinois. No, it had to go down in a blaze of hammy glory, as if its option were coming up and it was making a last desperate effort to stave off being kicked out of pictures.

He took his feet off his desk and looked over at Cliff Wesser, a sour lean individual, about forty-five, with graying hair, bags under his eyes big enough to need zippers, and a perpetually tired, sardonic expression. He was busy writing an advertisement for a new perfume, which the manufacturer had called, *Boudoir Bombshell*.

"Great business, isn't it?" Joe said. "Real art. Writing this drivel to tease

**There were other girls than Mona—and just as lovely—
particularly that one that always whispered in Joe's brain . . .**



a bunch of tired, fat dowagers into investing two dollars for a new personality, a new body, and guaranteed love affair. Your money back if you are not attacked five times on your way home from the store. That's what you're telling them, isn't it?"

Cliff stopped typing and looked over at Joe with a sardonic grin. "Something like that. What the hell's the difference? They like to hope, just like everybody else."

"Fine way for a grown man to make a living," Joe said. He looked disgustedly at the tips of his brown oxfords. "Why don't we get a job in a steel mill or a railroad yard? Our conscience wouldn't bother us so much if we did some honest work for a change."

"I have absolutely no interest in being honest," Cliff said. "You talk like all academic artists. 'Off to the steel mill! Off to the railroad yard! Work and sweat! Live honestly.' That's great, as long as you just talk about it. But did you ever work in a mill? Ten to one, no. It's hard, stinking work, and I don't want any part of it. I would rather sit in a warm office, for the same dough, and tell Mrs. Richdough how to win her husband back from his blonde secretary, although she couldn't do it even if she had her face lifted with a derrick. It's not honest, but damn it, it's clean and comfortable."

Joe took his feet off the desk and picked up a pencil. He drew a picture of a fat dowager having her face lifted by a derrick. It wasn't a very good picture.

"I don't really mean I'd rather work in a steel mill," he said.

"Then please stop talking about it," Cliff said, "it makes me nervous."

"I want to write. I want to write a good book. And what do I do? I sit here writing this junk just because they pay me for it. I'm a coward, that's all."

"No, you're not. You're just normal. You like to eat, you like a place to sleep, you like a drink, a smoke, a good time occasionally. This job gives you all those things. What the hell would a book give you? A headache, probably."

"Oh, I've heard all that," Joe said, "but it's no excuse. If a guy wants to write he shouldn't worry about physical things."

Cliff leaned back in his chair and looked at the ceiling.

"Now you are sounding the corny artist type. Why shouldn't you worry about the physical things? If you don't eat who else will worry? Let me tell you about me. When I was your age I wrote a play. A very fine play. But I couldn't eat it, I couldn't wear it, I couldn't live in it. So I threw it away. I got this job. I'm happy. I don't want to struggle, to torture myself, to live in a garret and write fine plays. Me, for Mrs. Richdough. She's not art, but she's steaks on the table and a case of beer on ice."

Joe looked at his watch and got up.

"YOU'RE a lot of help," he said. "I'm going to get out before I'm corrupted. I guess we can leave now. The whistle blew and we can take off our overalls."

"What's the hurry? The usual date with Mona?"

Joe nodded. "My excuse for living."

"How're you doing with her?"

"So-so. She doesn't think I make enough money."

"A very brilliant girl. Marry her and you'll own this joint in five years."

"I don't want to own this joint. I want to write."

"Pardon me," Cliff said. He went back to his typewriter. "I have the feeling of sitting through a bad show twice."

"Go back to Mrs. Richdough," Joe said. "She understands you."

"I just love that girl," Cliff grinned. "I think I'll promise her a date with Wolf Wolfman if she'll buy a gallon of Boudoir Bombshell."

"You would, too," Joe said gloomily, as he left the office.

He had a drink, then caught a cab out to the Wilshire Towers where Mona lived. The building was Hollywood Tudor, with a lot of glass-brick walls, palms, cute modern furniture, and about as much warmth as you'd find in the regrets of finance company.

Mona loved it. She thought it was *haut monde*, whatever that meant.

Joe went up to the sixteenth floor in an elevator that traveled as if it were jet-propelled.

He went down the wide, creamy-white corridors and knocked at Mona's door.

There was a little delay. There always was. Mona liked to build up dramatic effects by keeping people waiting. Joe wondered what she'd do if he spoiled her act sometime by arriving with nothing on but a pair of shorts. Then he wondered what was wrong with him tonight. He usually wasn't so sensitive and critical.

The door opened a few minutes later and Joe decided, as he always did, that the wait was worth it. Mona stood in the doorway, a bright smile on her face, looking every inch the brilliant young interior decorator.

"Joe, it's so nice to see you!" she cried. She extended one hand gracefully. "Do come in!"

For the second time Joe wondered why he was in such a critical mood. Did she always have to accentuate her words like a bobby soxer? Would something cataclysmic happen if she didn't extend one hand like a reigning monarch and invite him in, as if she were

a visiting diplomat?

Then his momentary irritation vanished as he looked at her, and realized for the dozenth time, how truly beautiful and chic she was.

Her hair was the color of ripe wheat, a creamy blonde that looked and was as soft as silk. She wore it up, so that it swept past her tiny ears like shimmering wings. Her features were regular and classic, and only in Joe's most exasperated moments did he wish they were a little less regular and a little more natural and expressive. Even if her features were unstimulating, which they weren't her body would have taken care of things nicely. She was slim and lush, qualities which too often don't go together. Her body had the pencil-slim appeal of a young girl, miraculously combined with the softly rounded curves of an exciting woman.

She had dancers' legs, almost too lovely to be real. The leg-make-up she wore transformed them to the color of well-creamed coffee, and gave them a texture that would have caused any self-respecting silk-worm to hang its head.

Joe found his irritation vanishing as he followed her into the living room of her chic apartment. He sat down and let her fix him a drink.

"Well," she said brightly, as she handed him a Martini, "how did the day go?"

She sat down before him on a footstool and sipped her drink. She managed to look like a charming school-girl, despite the drink, the chic apartment, her long bare legs and the platform shoes she wore. She could manage to look just about anyway she pleased.

SHE didn't really care how Joe's day had gone, and no one knew it better than Joe. It was part of her present act. The wide-eyed sympathetic

little woman, with a drink for the poor tired man.

"So-so," Joe said. "And you?"

That was a subject dear to her heart. "Simply ghastly," she said. She accentuated ghastly so that it acquired two extra syllables. "I had that simply horrible job to do for Raoul Martin. I told you about *that*. Well, the man is simply incredible. He wants chains in his apartment. Great brass chains hung from wall to wall, and satin drapes. Now I ask you? I told him it would look simply *weird*, and he said that was precisely his idea. Such an incredible creature! Really!"

"Must be quite a character," Joe said. He didn't put much enthusiasm in it. When Mona was exulting about her clients his toleration point sunk to a depressing low.

"Darling, you've no ideal. Another drink?"

"Might as well," Joe said. "And by the way, about that little deal of mine. Have you thought it over?"

Mona poured a drink and tried to look thoughtful.

"Marriage? Oh, Joey, don't be dull tonight! I simply can't marry you right away. I'm incredibly fond of you, but I simply can't."

"A proposal is your idea of dull conversation?"

"Now Joey, don't be stuffy! You know I can't stand stuffy people. I didn't mean to hurt you, but I really can't tell you right away how I feel."

"Do you love me?"

"Oh, loads, but that isn't the point."

"What is the point? Do we have to be psycho-analyzed or have our hand writing interpreted before we can get together?"

"Darling, it's nothing so sordid. It's simply a question of money."

"What could be less sordid?" Joe said. He drank his drink and looked

at the floor.

"Darling, don't be bitter and bourgeoisie. There's nothing sordid about money. I simply must have it. It's like—like nylons or anything else important."

"Well, let's have dinner, anyway," Joe said. "There's nothing sordid about steak I guess."

Mona laughed happily and then leaned forward and brushed her lips across Joe's cheeks. "That's my Joey," she cried. "I love you when you're so gay and silly."

THEY had dinner at a restaurant that made a point of not being inconvenienced by the butter shortage. There was a waiter in a blue uniform with a silver bucket of butter pats, whose only job was to toss a few lumps on empty plates. The management also made it a point of presenting its customers with a bill which looked like the closing figures of the Federal Reserve Bank.

When their after-dinner brandies were just luscious memories, Joe suggested a show. Mona wanted to go to the dog races, but when Joe told her greyhounds were really half-breeds she changed her mind.

They went to see Sylvia Dare in "Scarlet Passion." Sylvia was a new Hollywood import. She had won a beauty contest in a canning factory in Omaha and after several pictures, she had blossomed as a star. She was the hottest thing in town, a new sensation, the darling of the reviewers, choicest bait for the local wolves.

Mona and Joe found seats in the middle of the darkened theatre. They watched an animated cartoon, a short featuring a Southern Senator who advocated the repeal of the automobile, and finally the trailer for "Scarlet Passion" flashed on the screen.

The picture was an impossible bore, Joe decided after the first five minutes. The plot concerned the efforts of a group of ship-wrecked seamen to save their lives and to eventually effect their rescue. This was complicated by the arrival of Sylvia Dare, cast as a native girl, complete with sarong, impeccable coiffure, make-up and painted toenails. All the seamen wanted Sylvia, but she contented herself with performing exotic native dances, about as authentic as the Charleston, and spurning the amorous advances of the seamen. Her only line was something which sounded like, "Me no good for you," and it was obviously some harassed script writer's conception of how Pacific Islanders talked.

Of course, Joe decided, Sylvia really didn't have to talk. No one cared as long as they could look at her. She had thick blue-black hair, a pale, haunting face and a sultry-looking pair of lips, that were as tempting as any sultry looking pair of lips. The thing that interested Joe was that she looked nice. In spite of the heavy sex act, she looked like a girl who should be baking pies, raising kids and worrying about her speech at the local Parent-Teacher's meeting.

Mona hugged his arm and said, "But isn't she incredible? I mean *incredible!*"

"I thought that's what you meant," he said. He felt oddly annoyed. Incredible was a word which had an elastic interpretation in Mona's dialogue. Applied to Sylvia Dare it meant phony and cheap. For no good reason Joe didn't like it.

"I think she's nice," he said. "How the hell would you look dancing in front of a lagoon with a half dozen guys drooling at you? Like Jane Addams of Hull House, I suppose!"

"Oh, darling, you are precious,"

Mona laughed. "I imagine you *think* she's sweet."

"Well, I do," Joe said. He felt uncomfortable now and a little ridiculous. And stubborn.

"Darling you're a peasant at heart," Mona sighed. "I suppose that's what makes you a writer."

"I'm a hot writer. Real artist. Full of soul and spirit. Mrs. Richblood's little hired hack, that's all." For some reason all the bitterness he had felt in talking to Cliff was coming back.

SYLVIA DARE was looking at the audience now, but he had the strange impression she was looking at *him*. It was a close-up shot and her face filled the screen. Her eyes, hot and fiery were looking into his, and when her lips parted he felt a funny little tingle at the base of his spine.

It was almost as if she were going to *talk* to him!

Her lips parted, her voice sounded!

"*You don't have to be a little hired hack, Joe Evans!*"

Joe felt the little tingle at the base of his spine suddenly generate into a jolt of electricity that traveled up his back like a streak of lightning.

She had spoken to him!

"What do you know about it?" he demanded automatically.

Mona's fingers dug into his arm. "Joe, what's the matter?"

"She talked to me," he said. His voice was loud and a little hysterical. "She said I didn't have to be a hired hack."

"Joe, what *are* you babbling about?"

"About her. Sylvia Dare. She talked to me."

"Please, Joe," Mona said uneasily. "People are looking at you. I don't think you're being funny."

"I—I—" He couldn't get any words out, because he suddenly realized how

ridiculous he was sounding. She couldn't have spoken to him. The sound track had been canned months ago. There was no way she *could* speak to him. He'd read of things like this, where a person's mental attitude causes him to imagine he hears voices, but he never expected to experience it himself. It was damned unnerving.

He forced himself to look at the screen again. Mona was still watching him anxiously, and he felt a flush of embarrassment as he realized she must be thinking what a supreme sap he was.

Sylvia Dare was at the moment making a date with one of the seamen to meet him that night at the lagoon. The scene was full of innuendoes and the theatre was as quiet as a courtroom before the judge reads the verdict.

Sylvia spoke, her smooth voice flooded the theatre, and the words hit Joe with the effect of a stuffed eel skin at the base of the neck.

"Why don't you write that book, Joe Evans? Quit your silly little job and start writing! All you need is a little courage!"

Joe felt his mind reeling. The people in the theatre were laughing and Mona leaned close to him and whispered, "This is getting better. Wasn't that last line of hers simply *incredible*?"

"What do you mean?" Joe asked thickly.

"I don't believe you're listening, Joe. She just told that sailor she'd meet him at the lagoon tonight. And she told him to come prepared for anything. Even shark fishing. Isn't that priceless?"

"Let's get out of here," Joe said.

"What is the matter with you?"

"Nothing," Joe said, and he tried to tell him himself he meant it. But he was fighting a losing battle with an approaching attack of hysteria.

Sylvia Dare had spoken to him. She'd told him to quit his job and write a

book. But no one else had heard that. He was the only one who knew about it.

His hands were trembling. This was great! People who imagine they're Napoleon are also the only ones who know about it.

Mona was picking up her purse and gloves petulantly.

"Let's go, then," she said. "You've been acting strangely ever since you came in here. Maybe a change of scenery will do you good."

Outside, they stood under the hot brilliant lights of the marquee waiting for a cab.

"If you don't start paying a little attention to me," Mona said, "I'm going home." She said it half-playfully, but her lips were drawn down in a little-girl pout.

Joe wanted to get away and think. He felt he'd go mad if he had to spend another minute in anyone's company.

"Home?" he said. "That's a great idea. I mean, that's certainly a shame. You do look a little peaked, Mona. A glass of hot milk and a night's sleep is what you need." He laughed giddily for no reason at all and waved frantically at a passing cab.

The cab stopped. Joe opened the door, helped Mona in, gave the driver her address and some money and slammed the door.

"Joe!" Mona cried. "Have you gone crazy?"

"Your welcome," he said inanely, and walked quickly away.

HE SPENT the next two hours on a park bench. The night was warm, but a pleasant breeze was stirring the trees. Birds chirped occasionally and couples strolled by, arm-in-arm, looking into each other's faces and smiling.

Joe sat with his head in his hands. He didn't hear the birds, he didn't

feel the breeze, and he wouldn't have cared if Boyer and Garbo staged a wrestling match on the graveled pathway before his bench.

He had problems. Number one, and most important, was just how crazy he'd gone. He knew he was crazy, but he had an academic interest in the degree of imbecility he'd reached.

Voices . . .

That was always a bad sign. But he wasn't an ordinary case. No, not at all. The mild types heard voices coming from nowhere. But he had the gilt-edged, post-graduate type of insanity. He heard voices coming from movie stars. While everyone else in the theatre listened normally to conventional dialogue, he imagined the star was speaking to him. That was great.

He groaned and lit a cigarette. But he imagined it? He wasn't a neurotic type. He'd always been level-headed, realistic and normal. What had caused this complete deterioration?

He knew he'd get worse if he thought about it anymore so he got up and went home. Maybe things would look better tomorrow . . .

The next morning Cliff Nesser noticed something was wrong.

"What's eating you, chum?" he asked. "Still having soul struggles about the book you want to write?"

"No, nothing like that. I—I didn't sleep last night."

"You look like hell. Pale, drawn and beat-out. You should relax more. Take in the movies occasionally."

Joe winced. "Please don't talk like that anymore."

"I'm sorry. Did I say something?"

His lean face was worried. "Have you been battling with Mona again?"

"No," Joe said wearily. "I've just got a problem on my mind."

"You'd better get it off, then," said Cliff. "The Old Man wants to see you this morning. And he doesn't like competition from other problems. He wants to supply all the problems around here personally."

"He generally does," Joe said. "What the hell does the old goat want?"

"He wants to throw a slave to the lions on general principles. Seriously I don't think he liked that copy you did on men's raincoats."

"What does he want for a hundred bucks a week? Shakespeare?"

"Probably. He'd use the grave digger's scene in Hamlet to push his line of shovels." Cliff swung back to his typewriter and started tapping out a story. "Don't worry about it. If he fires you consider it a favor. You can write that book then."

"Everyone keeps telling me that," Joe said. He thought of last night's experience with Sylvia Dare and shuddered. Then he thought of his approaching interview with Old Man Carson and shuddered again.

OLD MAN CARSON was a living legend in the department store advertising business. No one minded his being a legend, but they objected to the fact that he was living.

He was a small, neat man, who affected wild sports clothes and yellow silk mufflers. He had a surprisingly deep voice and the fine sensitive feelings of a barracuda.

Joe said, "You wanted to see me, sir?"

Old Man Carson shoved a few papers around on the top of his desk and cleared his throat experimentally. He gave the impression he was limbering up the heavy artillery.

"Sit down, Evans," he said. "Might as well be comfortable."

Joe sat down. That last crack was

about as ironic as telling a man on a rick to relax and be comfortable. Carson was wearing a purple sports coat, steel-gray slacks and yellow silk muffler. The outfit would have looked bad on anyone; on Carson it looked hideous.

"Evans, I've been looking at some copy you wrote on raincoats. I don't like it. I believe in calling a spade a spade. If I don't like what people working for me are doing, I up and tell 'em. So I'm telling you I don't like this copy."

Joe heard the rumbling voice, but vaguely, the way a person is aware of thunder in the distance. His attention was on something else.

There was a foot-square picture of Sylvia Dare on Carson's desk. It was a close-up of her face. She was smiling lazily, her sultry-looking lips were parted and there was something in her eyes that could be interpreted as a challenge. Or eye-strain, possibly.

"Are you listening, Evans?"

"Hunh? Oh— Oh yes, Mr. Carson. You're quite right. Hit it right on the button."

Carson cleared his throat again and glanced at the picture. "You like the picture, eh? So do I. I'm trying to get her to come down to the store and autograph that new line of women's aprons I got in. Should be quite a stunt."

"Will she come?" Joe asked. He couldn't keep the note of surprise from his voice.

"Why not? I'll pay her. Pay her damn well. Why shouldn't she come? But that's beside the point. We were talking about that copy you wrote. I didn't like it. Well, what are we going to do, hey?"

"Well—" Joe said, "I—"

"That's the trouble. Don't know your own mind. Don't know what you want. Don't know how to do a simple job without lousing it up."

Joe wondered fleetingly how badly he wanted this job. He thought of Mona and what her reaction would be if he quit, and he decided he wanted it pretty badly. Enough to swallow his pride and take the humiliation Carson was so skilled at dishing out.

"Y—yes, sir," he said. "You're putting your finger right on the problem."

"Of course I am. But what are we going to do about it, hey?"

Joe looked away, because he couldn't stand the sight of this bad-tempered little sadist any longer. His eyes swung a little left and met the eyes of Sylvia Dare, looking at him from the picture.

He looked at her and suddenly he felt the tingle at the base of his spine. Her face seemed alive. Her lips seemed to be moving. And then he heard her voice.

"Joe Evans, why don't you tell this old goat to jump in the lake!"

"Jump in the lake!" he repeated incredulously.

"What!" roared Carson.

"I wasn't talking to you, sir," Joe cried. "I was talking to *her*."

"HAVE you gone crazy! I heard you tell me to go jump in the lake. Do you deny it?"

"No, sir. I mean, yes sir. I wasn't talking to you."

"Then who in the name of thunderation were you talking to?"

Joe felt his face getting hot. A feeling of panic was growing in his breast. What could he say? Could he tell the Old Man he was hearing voices? That he was on the fringes of stark insanity?

He swallowed and when he spoke his voice was hoarse.

"I—I'm upset today. I spoke without thinking, sir."

Carson glared at him. "Damned idiotic. Blurting out things like that." He moved the papers angrily about on his

desk and snorted like a frustrated bull. "When I talk I want to be listened to."

Joe saw with horror that Sylvia Dare's lips were moving again. Her voice came to him clearly, distinctly.

"Tell him what he can do with his old job, Joe."

Carson shouted, "Evans, are you listening?"

Joe glared at the picture. "Why don't you shut up for a while?" he said pleadingly.

Carson jumped to his feet and slammed his fist on the desk top.

"That does it, Evans. You're fired! Get out of my office. I won't let anybody tell me to shut up!"

"I was talking to her," Joe said frantically. He pointed a finger at the picture. "Didn't you hear her? She kept interrupting you!"

Carson pointed dramatically to the door. "Leave my office, Evans. You're a raving maniac or blind drunk. Maybe both."

"Didn't you hear her?" Joe demanded.

Carson glared at him. "I did not," he said coldly. "Neither do I see pink elephants or imagine I'm Alexander the Great. Go . . ."

Joe went back to his own office. Cliff looked up from his typewriter and said, "What goes?"

"I do," Joe said. He began collecting the few personal items on his desk and dropping them into his brief case.

"I don't get it," Cliff said. He swung around and looked at Joe. "Did the old man tie a can to you?"

"Something like that." Joe zippered his brief case and then he turned suddenly to Cliff. "Am I crazy? Give me a yes or no answer. No beating around the bush. Am I nuts?"

"Everybody's a little crazy," Cliff said, grinning. "But most of us are crazy in the same way so we don't

think anything about it. We call it normal. But what put this idea in your head?"

"I'm going mad," Joe said. "Stark, raving mad. That's why I got fired."

"Good. Now you can write that book."

"I'll be in a loony bin before much longer," Joe said. "Cliff, I've got to talk to you. I've got to talk to somebody. And I've got to have a drink. Maybe several."

Cliff got up and put on his hat.

"I don't want to listen to your symptoms, but the drink idea is a good one. *Allez!*"

THEY went to a bar across the street from Carson's department store. Joe ordered a straight whisky and drank it like a man who'd spent his formative years in the Sahara. He ordered another.

Then he told Cliff the whole story. He didn't leave out a thing. He told him about the incident at the theatre the night before, and the incident in Carson's office. When he finished he drank his second drink.

"So this dame is talking to you?" Cliff muttered. He drank his second drink. "Kind of odd at that. She talks to you right from the screen and out of pictures." He shook his head thoughtfully.

"You see?" Joe said. "I'm crazy as hell. I've got a gear loose somewhere. Maybe the whole damn works are stripped. I'm nuts."

Cliff looked at his empty glass and frowned.

"Sounds that way, but I wouldn't be too sure. There's a lot of funny things happen in this world. I know other people who hear voices. I'm not at all sure they're crazy. They actually *hear* those voices. Maybe it's thought transference or telepathy, but they hear voices

just the same. It doesn't bother 'em too much. Some of them argue with the voices. Others just listen and go on with their work. That's what you ought to do."

"How the hell can I?"

"Nothing to it. This gal has been giving you good advice. She's telling you to quit this silly job of yours and write that book. That's what you were telling you *should* do yesterday. So I'd listen to her. Write the book. What the hell can you lose."

"Mona is going to love this," Joe said.

"If she's any kind of a woman she'll say you're doing the right thing."

Joe looked at his drink and, for some reason, things didn't look so bad. Maybe Cliff was right. Maybe people did hear voices. Maybe they weren't crazy. And maybe Mona wouldn't mind. That last "maybe" was the tough one. He could sell himself on the other idea. But not on Mona's accepting this philosophically and cheerfully.

"I'll do it," he said, half-to-himself. "I'll tell Mona tonight I've tossed the job into the ashcan where it belongs."

"Fine," Cliff said. "She'll probably hug you to pieces."

"And then sweep the pieces out," Joe added dourly . . .

Mona thought he was being funny. She smiled at him and said, "Darling, don't be ridiculous. You know I don't believe you."

"But I'm telling the truth. I quit," Joe said. He didn't think it necessary to tell her he'd been fired.

They were sitting in Mona's apartment, having a drink before dinner. The sun coming through the wide windows made the room look cheerful and pleasant. Mona was reclining on a semi-circular lounge, which put her in a position where her contours were displayed to their best advantage.

She smiled again over the rim of her glass.

"Silly boy. What would you do if you quit that job?"

"I'd get that book done. I'd quit talking like a long-haired artist and go to work at it." He realized he was using the wrong tense. "I am getting to work at it. The job is over and done with." He looked at her uncertainly. "Well, what do you think?"

"I think you're—," she stopped and sat up suddenly. "Joe Evans I believe you are telling me the truth."

"Yes, of course, I am."

"I never heard anything sillier." She stood up and began pacing the floor. She was well aware that the slacks she wore did their most effective work when she paced. "You sound like an adolescent. Absolutely sophomoric."

"Is it adolescent to want to do something I feel I should do?"

"But what about money? You've thrown away a good job. You might have been a big man at Carlson's in three or four years. But you kick that out the window to do this absolutely *incredible* thing."

Joe stood up, too. He was getting angrier every minute.

"So it's only money that interests you? Well, I'm glad to know that."

"There are other things in the world beside money," Mona said, "but if you've got money you can buy them anyway."

"That's fine," Joe yelled. He couldn't think of anything else, so he said, "that's fine," again.

"Don't shout," Mona said. She had regained control of herself. Her voice was quite cool and languid. "I think we've exhausted the subject, anyway."

"Is this a brush-off? Do you want me to get the devil out of here?"

"Don't be so crude. Shall we say

I'd be happier if you'd close the door from the outside?"

"I get it," Joe said. "So long, honey. Don't think it hasn't been charming, because it hasn't."

"Dorothy Parker said that," Mona said absently. "And don't slam the door, darling." She lighted a cigarette casually.

Joe slammed the door.

THAT day he spent getting a place to write, a stack of twenty pound bond paper, a dozen pencils, a few typewriter ribbons and an eraser. When he had everything he could think of, he still felt he was lacking something.

Finally he realized what he wanted. He felt sheepish as he approached the newsstand.

"I want a magazine with a picture of Sylvia Dare in it," he told the newsdealer.

The newsdealer looked at him sourly. "I got about fifty books. How do I know which one she's in?"

"Well, don't you look at the magazines when you get them?"

"Naw. Can't waste the time. You look through 'em. Maybe you can find a picture of the dame."

Joe found a picture of her in one of the Hollywood magazines. She was on the cover, as a matter of fact, looking sultry and glamorous.

He bought the magazine and then he went to the room he had rented that day. It had a tiny kitchenette, a bed, a chest of drawers, and a table which he intended to use as a desk. He cut the picture of Sylvia Dare carefully from the book and propped it on the chest of drawers.

The girl in the picture looked back at him with a challenging smile. He realized again how incongruous she seemed in the type Hollywood had created for her. The blue-black hair

swept down over her forehead, the heavily carmined lips, and the brooding stare all seemed out of place. She was the kind of girl who'd have looked better in tennis shorts, with her hair up and a nice healthy tan.

He lit a cigarette and then undressed slowly. Tomorrow he'd start to work . . .

FOR the first week the hook went fine. He knew what he wanted to say and he put in ten and twelve hours a day getting it on paper. When he had ten thousand words on paper, he outlined the rest of the book and sent what he'd done to a New York publisher.

Then he went on working. A month went by and the stack of manuscript on his desk grew steadily. One morning his landlady slipped a letter under his door. He opened it nervously. The envelope had the trademark of World Publishing on it, and he knew that this was a verdict.

The World Publishing Co. liked what he'd sent them, and could he arrange to have the finished manuscript in their office within three months, so that it could be considered for fall publication?

That was the substance of the letter. Joe let out an excited yell and sat down in front of his typewriter.

Could he?

The typewriter began to rattle like a machine gun.

Things went great for another week and then he ran into trouble. Something was wrong and he couldn't put his finger on it. He was throwing every other page he wrote into the waste basket and he didn't particularly like the stuff he saved.

He wrote all morning and then, after lunch, when he re-read what he'd done, he started re-writing, throwing away

complete chapters, changing the plot around, re-slanting the characterization, so that by night he was right back where he started.

That went on for a week and he was getting desperate. He was living on coffee and cigarettes and his money was running low. He had to finish the book pretty soon or he wouldn't have enough strength left to pound the keys.

But the more he wrote, and the harder he tried, the less satisfied he became. He was smack in the middle of a neurotic complex and he couldn't lick it.

One night he ripped a page from the typewriter, got up disgustedly and began pacing the room.

"What in hell is wrong?" he muttered.

He stopped abruptly in front of the picture of Sylvia Dare. He felt an angry bitterness toward her. This had been her idea, hadn't it?

"Well what is wrong?" he demanded. "You were full of inspiring advice a while ago? You told me to quit the job and write the book, didn't you?"

He glared at the picture, and then he noticed something that brought a film of perspiration to his forehead. The picture seemed to be smiling. The lush lips were parting and there was a kindling sparkle in the depths of smouldering blue eyes.

"So it's my fault because you can't write?"

There was no mistaking the sarcasm in the soft voice.

Joe felt anger bubbling inside him.

"I didn't say that," he said. "You simply twisted what I said to make me look ridiculous. Every woman learns that trick at about the age of three."

"Well, what's your trouble? The book isn't going right, eh? That's not my fault. All I can tell you is to stop being so critical of your own work. You're tense and nervous because

you're so close to selling the book and that is making you worry about every word you write. Forget all that and just write your story as honestly as you can. It will be good. I'm sure of it."

HE SAID slowly, "Maybe you're right." He sat down at the typewriter again and slipped in a clean sheet of paper. He glanced at the picture and winked. "I'll give it a try, anyway."

His typewriter started clattering under his fingers and he finished the page before he realized there had been no answer from the picture. He glanced back at the picture. It was just a picture again. Pretty, smiling, but lifeless.

He wondered about it. He must be just as crazy as ever, he decided, but oddly enough it didn't worry him anymore.

The book started going right again. He put in ten hours a day, and he knew that what he was doing was good. In the little spare time he allowed himself he learned all he could about Sylvia Dare. From fan magazines he discovered that she had come to Hollywood with the announced intention of becoming a serious actress, of studying conscientiously, of learning all she could about the art, and then spending a few seasons in stock, doing revivals of plays which wouldn't make money, but which would teach her more about acting.

Joe thought about her casting in "Scarlet Passion" and the other stupid roles she had accepted and wondered what had happened to her high ideals.

He finished his book a month later and then spent two weeks re-typing it. When that was done he placed it tenderly in a cardboard box, bought a dollar and a half worth of stamps and sent it to the World Publishing Co. That

last expenditure left him with about three dollars. He bought a bottle of wine, in what he considered a fine artistic gesture and went back to his room to toast himself, his book, the World Publishing Co., and the gods that protect indigent authors.

After six or eight drinks he found that prospects looked bright. He'd written his book, and whether anybody read it or not, didn't matter. He'd done what he wanted to do, and that was enough. The room was dark and from where he sat, with his feet propped on his desk, he could vaguely see the picture of Sylvia Dare on the dresser.

"Well," he said, "I did it. I wrote my book."

He couldn't see her lips move, but he heard her voice, soft and little sad.

"You must be very happy, Joe. Doing what you want is more important than people know."

"Sure it is. But I'm surprised you know anything about it." He felt grand and lofty and just a little drunk. "What about your ambitions? Your desire to be a sincere actress and do stock company revivals? Was that something your press agent wrote?"

"Please, Joe. I really meant that, but—"

"Nonsense. Your letting them toss you into ridiculous pictures like Scarlet Passion and not doing a thing about it. You're great at giving other people idealistic advice, but you haven't the guts to take it yourself. Am I right?"

But the picture didn't answer. And Joe went to bed in his dark room feeling a little sad and lonely and more than a little tight.

The next morning he had a bad head and he still felt lonely. After he shaved he went downstairs and outside. The day was cold and overcast, and it fitted his mood perfectly. He bought a

paper and went into a restaurant for a cup of coffee.

He looked through the paper absently until he came to the section devoted to show business. And there he saw an item that startled him. It was a feature story under the by-line of a Hollywood reporter.

It began:

"Hottest news in the film colony this A.M. is Sylvia Dare's announcement that she is quitting pictures to join a touring stock company. The young starlet, who rocketed to sensational heights in Scarlet Passion, notified her producer last night that she is walking out of Love Indigo. Insiders believe . . ."

Joe didn't bother reading what the insiders believed. He left his coffee cooling on the counter and went back to his room. His head was spinning with speculation.

She *had* heard him. She *must* have heard him. And she had acted on what he had said.

He scooped up the phone and called a friend of his, a man about the village, who knew most of the unlisted phone numbers in town. He asked his friend for Sylvia Dare's phone number and a few minutes later he was dialing the number.

He listened to the phone ringing in his ear, and he realized his heart was pumping in an extraordinary way.

Supposing she didn't answer? Supposing her maid said Miss Dare isn't in?

Then the connection was broken and a soft, wonderful voice said, "Hello Joe. I knew you'd call."

"Sylvia," he said. "You knew it was me?"

"Of course. This is all so strange—but it seems to be just right, too."

MASTER OF THE LIVING DEAD

By ED EARL REPP

Steve thought the advertisement was a joke. But he changed his mind when Merl Blair lost face—literally!

"TAKE a look at the story I've got marked out on page one, beautiful!" Steve Mallory spread a newspaper out on the lunch room table in front of Merl Blair. "That classified ad I told you about sometime ago has broken into the news columns."

Like many New Yorkers who sought escape from the mad, banging clatter of Times Square, the young couple had come to Danny's Restaurant for lunch and a quiet hour together. Here the shrilling of police whistles, the clamor of traffic, the snarling whine of sirens and a thousand-odd other instruments grinding out a symphony of noise were muted by the efficient sound-proofing of the popular eating place. It was said in praise that in a rear booth you didn't have to yell through a megaphone to be heard across the table.

Steve and Merl frequently went there when he could get away from the paper long enough and she could leave Acme Insurance for a time in the hands of the company president. Of course you had to pay dearly for such privacy and quiet. But being young and in love they liked to pretend

that a young reporter could afford such luxuries for the girl who was going to be his wife. Yet both knew that as private secretary to H. A. McCafferty, she earned almost twice as much as he did as a twenty-five-dollar-a-week newshawk.

Merl Blair, brunette, blue-eyed and trim in her neat tweed business suit, picked up the newspaper to glance intently over the two-column box in the lower right hand corner. A little frown furrowed her forehead as she read the words within the square.

"The ad is still running, is it?" she said without looking up. "I thought it was a joke or a patent medicine advertisement with a new angle."

"That's what we figured at first," Steve said, breaking open a French roll, "but police headquarters is getting interested. It smacks of skull-duggery."

Merl's eyes, accustomed to reading insurance policies rapidly, swept with growing interest over the article. At the top of the box was a reprint of the mysterious advertisement that had been running in all the metropolitan dailies for almost a year. It read:



NEW BODIES FOR OLD!

Are you young in spirit and desires, but old in body? Does a seventy-year-old face deny you the companionship of young people? If so, you are being cheated of the things science and skill can give you. A new process has enabled a select number of men and women to become fifty years younger. If you would like to exchange the ugliness of old age for the beauty and vitality of youth—without plastic surgery—write Box 84, this newspaper, for particulars.

Merl looked up with a musical laugh. "It makes the Fountain of Youth sound like a fish pond, doesn't it?" she commented.

"You haven't read anything yet, Sugar," Steve grinned. "Read it all—carefully. I wrote it."

Again her eyes dropped to the paper and she read the article beneath the ad slowly and half aloud to grasp its full import.

"For the past two years the larger New York papers have carried this advertisement. And now, on the heels of several unexplained disappearances, the police are endeavoring to find out if there is any connection between the missing persons and the advertisement.

"All replies to 'Box 34' are answered by a pamphlet left in care of the newspapers. The pamphlet is still more incredible. It warns prospective customers to be prepared to spend large amounts of money, and to furnish references. If the beauty seekers are still not frightened away, they are instructed to do the following strange things: Insert a classified ad stating the exact hour that they will be ready for a call from 'Mr. Jones'. Rent a house for a month and have installed therein a short wave transmitter. Have a telephone installed. At the hour they have stated they will be ready for the advertiser's call, sent out on a certain wave-length the number of their telephone.

"Dauntless even in the face of these instructions, police investigators have followed them to the letter. Each time, within fifteen seconds of their giving the phone number to 'Mr. Jones' in this roundabout way, they have had a call from him.

"The prospect is asked his name, his address, his telephone number. He is then warned to leave the house immediately, before police, who will also have picked up his telephone number on the short wave can have time to trace the number and pick him up.

"However, the mysterious Mr. Jones has never called any of the police investigators. Apparently he does some investigating of his own. Whatever the answer, police admit that they are no nearer the solution than they were before they tackled the problem. For the time being it remains one of Manhattan's strangest puzzles."

MERL'S lips broke suddenly into an amused smile. "What some people won't do for a joke!" she laughed.

Steve took a bite of the roll. "I don't know about that joke business," he mused. "There's hundreds of people with money who would give plenty to have a beautiful face. And there are plenty of others who need a change of face just as bad, only they don't seem to know it."

"Meaning me, I suppose?" Merl said crisply. She laid her fork down and reached for her hat, her lips set in a tight line.

"Hey, not so fast!" Steve stopped her. "I make a harmless remark and you turn it into an insult. Still, I ought to know by now that everything I say is eventually used against me. What I meant was people like old Hatchet Face that runs your apartment house."

The girl laid her hat down again.

"Well, that's better," she said severely. "Besides, I may look terrible right now, but you'll have to admit by tonight that I've been gloriously transformed. I got the whole afternoon off just to get myself made over for our Saturday night splurge."

Steve looked interested. "Going to wear that blue dress I like?"

Merl shook her head. She placed her elbows on the table, cupped her chin in her hands and said radiantly, "I'm going to be rejuvenated from head to foot. New dress, new shoes, new everything. Then I'm going to the beauty parlor for the rest of the day. I'll be wearing a white flower in my buttonhole so you'll know me."

And so, in the dozens of little things that required telling about her new outfit, the subject of the strange advertisement was lost. But back in Steve's mind there still lurked a suspicion that was not quite covered up. He was more intrigued by the problem than he had admitted. For there seemed to be a certain relation between the strange disappearance of several persons lately and the ad. A relation that even the police could not explain, nor Steve, whose paper had had him on the job from time to time.

Time passed swiftly. Suddenly Steve shot a look at his wrist watch. "Good night!" he exclaimed. "I'm due at the office ten minutes ago. I'll see you tonight at the apartment—eight o'clock. Gonna be on time for once?"

Without waiting for a retort, he grabbed the check and headed for the door. A jangle of noise swept through the door as it swung behind him, and then he was gone.

FOUR o'clock found Merl still busily scanning shop-windows. Her trim little figure, supple in an attractive gray

suit, moved from window to window, apparently aimlessly; then, suddenly, she would disappear into a door and reappear with a new bundle.

It was just after she decided to cut her shopping tour short that she noticed the man watching her. As she shot a swift glance at him, she realized she had seen him behind her for some time. She was puzzled when he smiled and tipped his hat.

She frowned as her mind groped for remembrance of him. He was about six feet tall, with wide, bony shoulders and thin hips. His skin had a pink, well-massaged look. He wore a well-fitting dark suit and a derby. At first glance he looked like any prosperous stockbroker, but something in his face gave the lie to his prosaic appearance. His eyes were a frigid luminous green, his brows black and heavy. A broad, flat nose overhung a mouth which, in spite of its present smile, wore a contemptuous look. There was nothing on which the girl could pin her instant dislike of him, but she had the feeling that no matter what his face expressed, his mind would be disdainful. While she was still considering him, he stepped from the curb and approached her.

Something about him compelled her to wait for him. His voice was faintly mocking as he smiled, "I believe we have a mutual acquaintance."

"I—I don't believe so," the girl faltered. She was on the point of walking away when he touched her arm and pointed across the sidewalk.

"Have you forgotten that gentleman?" he asked.

Merl's eyes flashed to the spot he indicated. Abruptly, she winced and a little cry escaped her as something pricked her arm where he had touched her. In a flash she whirled on him. "I don't know you, and I don't know him!" she flared. "What's more, I—I—"

Then she stopped. She raised her hand and passed it across her brow. She felt a strange lassitude seeping through her body. Suddenly she wanted to relax and just wander along lazily not thinking, not struggling. She felt as though she would rather someone else did her thinking for her. This man, for instance.

The man seemed agreeable to the idea too, for his disdainful lips parted momentarily to breathe, "My car is at the curb. Won't you let me take you home?"

Merl nodded. Unresisting, she allowed herself to be helped into the coupe and driven off. The sedan headed swiftly down Broadway, until it was swallowed up in the hundreds of other automobiles which surged back and forth down the thoroughfare. One of her bundles still lay on the sidewalk where she had dropped it.

CHAPTER II

The Living Dead

THERE was something empty, something far-off about the sound of the doorbell as Steve pressed it that night. It didn't sound the way a doorbell should, somehow. But maybe it was the fact that there was no noisy little tattoo of high heels as soon as its summons ceased.

Mallory leaned against the wall by the door and grinned vacantly at the cellophane florist's-box he held between his flattened palms. Inside it, resplendent beneath its gleaming cover, lay a single white orchid.

After a moment he shoved his thumb against the button once more. Again the far-off ring of the bell. And still no answering heels or cry of, "Hold your horses, mister! I'll be right there."

Frowning a little Steve Mallory

pressed the button a third time. He waited, then knocked loudly and called, "Merl! Are you in there?"

There was no answer. Cold fear gripped at Steve's vitals. An unnamed dread lay hold of his senses and paralyzed him for a moment. Then he shook off the feeling and pounded louder. This time he got a reply.

Down the hall a klaxon-like voice rang out, "I'll trouble yez to keep yer shoutin' an' halloooin' fer the streets, Mr. Mallory! If the young lady ain't in, why don't yez stay at home fer a change?" Mrs. Sewell, buxom and red-haired, stood with her arms crossed before her door and nodded viciously to emphasize her managerial authority.

Steve swung around and strode hurriedly towards the woman. "Did she leave any word for me?" he asked, ignoring her tirade.

"Nary a word," the manager told him. "Now, why don't yez run along an' . . ."

"But I had a date at eight o'clock with her." Steve frowned. "It's not like her to leave me waiting this way. Do you have an extra key?"

Mrs. Sewell sighed resignedly. "Very well," she gave in. "Here's the key, an' bring it back when you're convinced she ain't there."

Steve hurried back and let himself in. He stood in the doorway for a moment looking, tight-lipped, about the apartment. There was no sign of Merl's having been home since he talked to her. No bundles, no strings on the floor from packages hastily opened. He went through the three rooms hurriedly and finally stood in the middle of the room and bit his lip thoughtfully.

Cold fear was creeping up his spine. Why hadn't she been home? Saturday night was their big night, when they took in dinner and then a show, or perhaps a dance. She lived alone, so there

was no one to give him any clues as to where she might have stayed. But eight o'clock! She should have been home by six.

He thought of everything that might have happened to her. Accidents. Sudden sickness. Amnesia. With a muttered curse he shook off the fears and strode to the telephone. He knew a few of the girl's friends, and he sat down to call them.

It was half an hour before he gave up. At the end of that time he knew not a thing more than he had. With a sudden wave of realization he knew that Merl was gone—that his fears had not been groundless, or he would have located her somewhere. Frantically he dialed police headquarters and told them the facts, gave a detailed description of the girl. Steve Mallory was well-known at headquarters, and well-liked. He received the desk sergeant's promise to do all that could possibly be done for him.

White-faced and a little shaken, he locked the apartment again and took a taxi to the *Herald* office. Tom Noble, city editor on the paper, was the best friend Steve had, despite the discrepancy in their ages and the fact that Noble was his boss. He sought him instinctively now, knowing Noble's shrewd mind would ferret out the essential facts needed to find the girl.

NOBLE was still at his desk in the city room, his stout body tipped back in the chair, coat open, vest undone. A puzzled smile came over his face when he saw the boy back again. He scratched his head through thinning white hair. "What brings you here, Steve? Thought this was your night with Merl?"

"Tom! She's gone!" Steve blurted, standing over his desk and staring down intensely.

"Gone!" Noble asked incredulously. Then a grin softened the sudden harsh lines of his face. "I get it. Two-timing you for some other guy, eh?"

"Oh, God, I only wish she were!" the boy groaned. Hurriedly he went on to blurt out the whole story. He concluded frantically, "Where can she be, Tom? She wouldn't stand me up like this on purpose."

Noble tapped thoughtfully on the desk top with a pencil point. "I don't know," he replied quietly. "You've called the police?"

"Everybody. All her friends, her boss—everybody I know who'd have any ideas." On a sudden thought he stiffened. "Tom! You don't suppose—that ad—the one about new bodies, pretty faces for old ones—"

Noble laughed softly. "Oh, now, don't get so excited, my boy," he advised kindly. "That ad is nothing but a joke, in my opinion. Or else it's a trick of some crooks for communicating important information. That would be an absolutely fool-proof system."

"But maybe it's not a joke! Maybe—maybe white slaves, or—God knows what."

Noble shoved back from the desk and pulled out a bottom drawer. "Steve," he said sternly, "I've got what you need right here. I save it for occasions like this. You're going to put about four fingers down and then you're going to relax and sit right here until we get a call from headquarters saying they found her asleep in some theater, where she went after shopping. White slaves—! Why with an imagination like that, you'll be doing a syndicated column in no time!"

FOR an hour after the man had accosted her on the street, Merl was in a fog of strange lassitude and mental sleepiness. When at last she came out

of it, she thought, for one shocked instant, that she was still in a nightmare. Huddled in a chair, she sent an incredulous glance about her, trying to piece the crazy-quilt facts she remembered into a complete story.

She was in a corner of a big, white-walled room. At the corner to her right the room jutted out into a large, circular alcove which seemed to be a supply room. At her left, diametrically across from the supply room, was another alcove full of strange apparatus and webbed with glass tubes. Straight ahead of her, in fact taking the whole room in one glance, she saw that it was completely bare. But in the very center of the place there was a large, rectangular, glassed-over section beneath which she could see machinery and two operating tables. There were steps leading down to this, though they were cut off now by the glass shield over the sub-floor room.

The girl saw no one, nor heard anyone, so after a moment she stood up and moved down towards the alcove to the left. As she drew closer to it, she felt a cold wave of revulsion sweep her. At first, not seeing anything to base her sensation of disgust upon, she thought it was simply fear. Then, as she stood in the very entrance to the place—she understood.

In the center of the room was a large glass apparatus consisting of two great cylinders side by side, with a maze of hundreds of thread-like glass tubes leading from them. One of the tanks was filled with a clear liquid; the other was a dark red. Some of the tubes leading from them appeared to be empty because of the transparency of the liquid they carried. Others were dark, like the tank on the right. The level of the liquids changed constantly, surging up and down, up and down, regularly.

A small battery of black machinery ringed about the tanks accounted for this motion, apparently. But it was the contents of the glass globes on shelves that lined the semi-circular wall of the alcove that made Merl shudder.

Straight across from her she thought she made out human heads within the fishbowl-like containers! They were old and wrinkled, with scraggly hair drifting before the faces like undersea growths surging to and fro. The eyes were wide open, and Merl decided they must be lidless. Then to her horror she saw one of the heads blink its eyes exactly like a live head would! The eyes glanced about, stopped on the girl's shuddering form, then moved on restlessly.

"Good Heavens!" she gasped, her hand flying to her throat.

In other bowls she saw human hands drifting slightly in the liquid that filled them. She saw one bowl entirely filled with little white globes that could be only one thing—human eyes! There was a foot in another container, a forearm in still another. Suddenly the girl went cold. Her stomach seemed to drop and her legs felt weak. But before her shocked senses could recoil completely before the gruesome sight, and leave her lying senseless on the floor, a voice brought her whirling about.

"A very interesting display, don't you think?" the man said tauntingly. "I can assure you that you will not find anything like it anywhere else in the world."

Merl's widened, terror-filled eyes flashed over the form of the man who had abducted her. But now he was dressed in a surgeon's smock, and was wearing rubber gloves. Behind him stood a huge, black-thatched man in a similar outfit.

"What do you mean by bringing me here?" she flared suddenly, anger wash-

ing the fear from her heart. "If you've kidnaped me, I can promise you you won't get a cent. I have no relatives, and no one with any money to pay you."

"My dear young woman, you wrong me. I am no kidnaper. I am what you might call a—substitutional plastic surgeon." The man wrung his hands briskly.

Something in his tones brought the cold terror back into Merl's heart again. She licked her lips and tried to speak, but this time the words would not come.

"Now, you needn't be frightened, young woman," the man said severely. "If you have any ideas that I might be wanting to add you to my collection, here, don't worry yourself about that. Nor am I trying to get money from you. Quite the contrary—I intend to make you one of the wealthiest women in New York!"

MERL BLAIR clenched her small fists and faced him, white-lipped, determined to find out what she was faced with. "Will you please tell me what you want with me?" she demanded. "Who are you? And what do you mean by that—making me one of the richest women in New York?"

She looked very small, very frightened, and yet very pretty as she stood before the two men and waited for a reply. The abductor noticed it, for he turned to his helper and smiled, "I think Mrs. Van Gogh will be very pleased with her, don't you, Krishner? Exactly the type she ordered."

Krishner, the lumpy man who stood behind him, nodded and muttered something unintelligible.

Now the other man turned to the girl rather briskly. "But it is cruel to keep you in the dark like this. First—let me introduce myself. I am Dr. Eric Sturvison. You may remember I was relieved of my license some five years ago

for what was termed 'dangerous and distasteful experimentation on human bodies.' To prove how utterly wrong they were, I have gone on with my work and perfected a method for making old men and women as beautiful as the young."

"Then you are the man who runs that ad!" Merl accused.

"Exactly. And to show you how much I mean it, let me show you something." He took the girl's arm and led her to the center of the room, to the very edge of the glassed-in cubicle below. Merl flinched at his touch, but she knew how useless resistance would be. Her whole being shuddered at the thought of looking down there, but she finally brought her gaze down through the glass into the operating room below.

A little cry escaped her. Her shocked gaze took in the form of an old woman lying on one of two operating tables, covered from foot to neck with a sheet. Her face was wrinkled and seamed, yellowed with age and drawn. The lips drew in about the mouth over toothless gums. Her eyes were closed in sleep.

"The lady is Mrs. Van Gogh," Sturvison said. "One of the wealthiest patients I have attended yet. She grew so homely and old that she finally decided to submit to my treatment. The face she selected was to be oval shaped, blue eyed, brown haired, smooth of complexion. Type number 13, to be specific. In other words—your own type!"

The girl fell back in terror as the whole, ghastly idea penetrated her frozen consciousness. She felt the big, hard hands of Krishner close on her shoulders, pinning her helplessly against him.

Sturvison came closer to her, his cold green eyes glaring at her with fanatical intensity. "I think you understand now," he said tightly. "Your own head is to be removed from your lovely shoul-

ders and placed on the shrivelled, stooped—but wealthy—body of the hag down in the operating chamber! No, I am not mad," he said, as her eyes told him the thoughts in her mind. "Unless you call it mad to prefer making a hundred thousand dollars for an operation such as this to giving my discovery to the scientific world—the scientific world that turned me out in the cold. In the two years I have been working here, I have amassed a little fortune of one and one-half million dollars."

Terror held Merl rigid as he went on quickly. He was talking now with a boastful tone in his voice, taking this opportunity to flaunt his discoveries before a helpless victim.

"You will notice the odd arrangement of the two operating tables," he said. "They are placed head to head for convenience. Between them you see a flat, enameled wheel, placed so that it cuts off the right corner of one table and the corresponding corner of the other. Your head will lie on one part of the wheel, and Mrs. Van Gogh's on the other, diametrically opposite. At the proper time, I press a switch, and the wheel makes one-half revolution—faster than the eye can see. When the wheel stops, Mrs. Van Gogh will have the head of a beautiful girl—while you, my dear, will be possessed of the toothless head of a hag! But you will not be forced to meet the world with such a face. You will be placed in my 'body bank,' where I retain such bodies as yours for future use. Suspended animation preserves beautiful bodies for me until the time when I am able to perform other operations than this one."

He spoke sharply to Krishner. "The needle," he clipped. Without waiting for a response, he turned and pressed a switch on the floor. The glass shield slid back and left the cubicle free to

their entrance. Sturvison went down the steps.

Again there was a slight stab in the girl's arm. She cried out, tried to slide from Krishner's grip. And then the deadly lassitude came down over her and held her powerless. The giant helper picked her up in his arms, carried her down the steps, and laid her on the operating table.

CHAPTER III

Voice from the Grave

FOR Merl the next five minutes were a ghastly nightmare. It was like one of those dreams in which one knows he is sleeping, and yet cannot awake. But not for a second did she lose consciousness. Sturvison hovered over her threateningly, his harsh voice crackling in her ears like an electric arc.

"I have one of my less successful fellow-scientists to thank for the success I myself have had," he told her, almost boastfully. "Were it not for the discovery of Dr. Schwartz of the Carnegie Institution that the brains of earthworms lose their memories in the process of transplantation, I might never have conceived the idea of transplanting human heads from one body to the other.* But that interesting fact reassured me about something. No human being upon whom I operated could ever remember anything about the operation! Thus I am always perfectly protected. When your head is on Mrs. Van Gogh's shoulders, your brain will have no recollection of anything prior to the operation. I will inform her of all the facts she needs to know regarding her past life. Within two weeks she will be ready to re-enter society. And your own body will be saved by suspended animation

* Free, E. E., "New Bodies for Old," *American Weekly*, April 10, 1938.

for future use—in my 'body bank'."

Sturvison smiled bleakly and started to lay out a few simple surgical instruments on the table beside him. But he did not remain silent for long. His scientific being, starved for the companionship of men of his caliber, whose society had been denied him because of his own experiments, was now preening itself in half-boastful, half-didactic explanations.

"My work here is not new," he went on slowly. "For years men have been working towards the end I have achieved. Heymans managed to keep a dog's head alive as much as twenty-five years ago. Giersberg, of the University of Breslau, transplanted the brains of tadpoles successfully. Professor Hans Przibram, at the University of Vienna, has even managed to transplant the heads of certain grasshopper-like insects and restore the insects to complete normalcy.

"But this was nothing compared to the task that faced me if I were ever to see my dreams realized. I had to manage to transplant human heads in the space of time it takes a heart to beat. Less than a second, in other words. It must be done so fast that no blood can be lost. That is the purpose of the wheel upon which your head is resting—beside that of this wealthy hag. But even the lightning action of this machine will not suffice to maintain life if the arteries are severed. Hence—" Sturvison exhibited several feet of transparent, flexible tubing to the girl. "—artificial veins, you might call them. Before I separate your head from your body, I transfer the flow of blood from your veins and arteries to the corresponding ones of this woman, by means of these tubes. After the operation, they shrink and dissolve, leaving the veins perfectly healed. So you see, even before the operation takes

place, your blood is pumping through her head, and hers through yours."

Now he turned swiftly and took two odd-looking masks from the operating-room closet a short distance away. Merl's eyes watched him helplessly. Terror had left her numb. She seemed to see and hear these things with an air of detachment, as though she were separated from her body. With the awful implication of that thought, her mind rushed to the thing that was being done to her. It was incredulous, impossible to believe—that her own head was to be put on the old woman's body, and the wealthy woman's head on hers. She shuddered as she thought of going through life with a body already old, a body horrible to look at. Her mind recoiled from thinking of the effect it would have on Steve to see her like this. Then the lumbering assistant's face loomed over her, and brought her back to the things at hand.

Krishner was wearing one of the masks Sturvison had just procured. His blocky face looked unearthly behind the gleaming goggles and the gray rubber mask. The mask puffed and relaxed, puffed and relaxed, with his breathing. A small tank was strapped to his chest now. Before she could move, a set of straps were thrown across her breasts, holding her tightly on the table. Her arms and legs were then secured in the same manner.

STURVISON strode quickly across the small room to a switchboard near the steps. He threw a knife switch in. Instantly the glass shield over the room slid closed. Then he returned to the table and fixed a mask onto Merl's face. The touch of the scientist's cold, moist hands repelled her, but she was utterly powerless to fight now.

His voice came to her with a soft,

muffled tone, deadened by layers of mask material. "A necessary precaution, though somewhat awkward for Krishner and myself. Ordinary germicides are useless in such an operation as this. The entire room must be filled with an antiseptic gas." As he spoke, he reached beneath the operating tables and turned on a tank of compressed gas. In a matter of seconds the room was filled with swirling green layers of poisonous gas.

Like undersea monsters, barely seen in the gloom, Krishner and Sturvison moved about, adjusting the bodies of Merl and the old woman to exact spots on the tables. The adjustments were checked and rechecked, for this was the most important part of the operation. When the wheel spun, the heads must be in exactly the right position to fit onto their new bodies.

Now the two surgeons—Sturvison quick and sure, Krishner plodding and acting as though he worked by mental order from the scientist—swung from the head of each table a shining, heavy knife that pivoted on an axis close to each woman's head. With a single, swift motion, the knives would do their work, and as they flashed through the slots beneath the subjects' necks, a switch would be tripped which would revolve the wheel. A few pin-pricks told Merl that the artificial veins were being installed.

Merl's lips parted as though she would cry out, but she made no sound. The gas in her own mask was not pure air. Slowly and steadily insensibility was seeping through her body. Her eyelids felt heavy and her breath seemed to come more slowly with every drawn gasp. Over her body hung the ghastly, masked face of Dr. Sturvison, faintly seen through the drifting swirls of green vapor. He clipped an order to Krishner, and the giant's shoulders

bulged as he prepared to swing his knife through the Van Gogh's woman's neck.

The girl's slim body tensed against the straps that held her powerless. With one last effort she managed a scream through her bloodless lips. But the sound was weak, scarcely carrying to the scientist. Then, as consciousness fled from her, she saw Sturvison's face distort. He snapped, "*Now!*"

The last thing Merl was conscious of was a shining arc swinging through the green fog. . . .

TWO endless days of anxiety had made Steve Mallory a haggard, distraught figure. The day after Merl's disappearance he had spent in dashing here and there investigating every possible angle that might lead him to her, but by now he realized the futility of running around without any plan in mind.

Tom Noble was doing everything he could to pacify the boy. He published pictures of the missing girl by the dozen, and filled half of the first page with news and descriptions relative to the case. But by nine o'clock the second night after she had vanished, he was becoming desperate himself.

With a feeble attempt at reassurance, he told him, now, "It must be amnesia, Steve. That's all it can be. People don't just vanish like that without any trace. If it was—murder, say, the body would have turned up by now. It's my bet that she's wandering around somewhere wondering where the devil she it."

Steve shook his head wearily. "No, it can't be that, Tom. Merl was in perfect health. Amnesia doesn't often attack as healthy a girl as she was. I—I don't know what to think. I'm past thinking, I guess."

The white-haired editor leaned back

in his swivel chair and shoved his hands in his pockets. The room they were in was small and littered with scraps of paper, for they had left the city room and sought one of the smaller, private rooms where they could have quiet. On the battered desk lay a copy of the evening paper, just off the press an hour before. Noble glanced at it. "At least we know one thing," he volunteered. "That crazy ad doesn't have anything to do with the case. Whoever is running it mailed his money in for another month just this morning. If it was he that had abducted Merl, he'd probably let it slide for a while."

Steve's dark eyes fastened on the paper with sudden interest, as though he were seeing it for the first time. His forehead, already cobwebbed with fine lines from long hours of sleeplessness and distraction, creased more deeply as an idea took hold of him. His fingers shoved through his thick hair. Suddenly he blurted, "My God, Tom! I'd forgotten about that thing. Why—why couldn't it be the answer? Probably he'd keep on using the ad just to throw off suspicion."

"What does he care about suspicion?" Noble countered. "He's got a fool-proof system that even the best investigators at headquarters haven't been able to dent. We've even had a couple of our own boys on it. If I'm any judge, Steve, it's nothing more than a means of communicating some secret message from one party to another. A code, more'n likely."

"But two years!" Steve exclaimed. "It wouldn't take two years to get the message across. No, I'm convinced there's really something back of it. Something I don't even like to think about." He got up and walked thoughtfully to the window. His eyes took in glumly the glittering night picture below him that was New York. Down

there people were crowding the streets in a search for amusement. And up here in the *Herald* office misery and anxiety blotted out all thoughts of pleasure and happiness.

Tom Noble's voice came gently to him as he stood there. "Give the idea up, Steve. I've seen so many of these cases, though never so close to home, that I can almost call my shots before the stories are broken. And I'd take an oath on it that that half-baked classified has no more to do with it than an ad for Dr. Whoosit's Little Liver Pills. And besides—there's nothing more you can do to break it than what the police have tried. There's simply no place to start."

Steve sighed. "Yeah, I know," he agreed. "We can't do anything but sit and wait. And keep on printing news that doesn't mean anything. And all the time we're doing it Merl is somewhere suffering or—"

Noble got up heavily as the boy broke off. "Take it easy, Steve," he advised. "Thinking along that line will just make things worse. All we can do is wait and be ready to act the minute any news comes in. But in the meantime, I've got to get some sleep. You stay here, if you like. If anything happens, you'll be right here to know about it." He went to the door and took his hat off the hook beside it. In a moment the door closed behind him.

Hardly had Steve got settled in the chair after Noble left, when the shrill warning note of the telephone shattered the stillness. He jumped as his trigger-like nerves were jarred. So startled was he that the phone rang a second time before he could pick up the receiver. Frowning at the unexpected call, for calls were never taken in the ante-rooms unless the operator relayed them there, he picked up the desk set and said, "Yeah?"

"Steve!" a voice said excitedly. "Is that you, Steve?"

In a flash Steve Mallory was on the edge of the chair, gripping the receiver with a hand that trembled. The voice was that of Merl Blair!

CHAPTER IV

The Beautiful Hag

FOR a long moment Steve couldn't speak. He seemed frozen rigid with the unexpectedness of it. Then he cried, "Merl! For Lord's sake what's happened? Where are you, and—why haven't you let me know?"

The voice at the other end sounded weak and uncertain. "I don't know, Steve. I can't remember anything, most of the time, and then all of a sudden I remember being on an operating table, or being picked up on the street."

"But where are you?" Mallory pleaded anxiously.

"I don't know that, even. It looks like some sort of sanitarium, or something. But—Steve, there's something wrong with me! Some horrible thing has happened to me!"

The strength seemed to flow out of Steve's body, then. All the fears he had entertained for the last two days seemed justified. Before he could speak, the girl went on dazedly,

"My face looks just the same in the mirror, but—but my body is like an old woman's! It's wrinkled, and stooped, and pouchy. . . . Oh, Steve, you've got to come and get me!"

Steve's knuckles whitened on the receiver. "What number is written on your telephone?" he asked tensely.

There was a pause while the girl looked it up. The boy's whole body was trembling as he waited, for that number would mean that he had found

the way to her. He held his breath, anxious to catch her words. Then, after a moment, a puzzled look came into his eyes. "Merl!" he said quickly. "Can't you find it?"

"Whom did you want, young man?" a different voice cut in. "There is no one by that name at this address. This is the Van Gogh residence."

Mallory was stunned. The voice sounded like Merl's, and yet it was different. It sounded rather husky, and more than a little imperious. "Merl—what's happened?" he cried.

"I have told you that no one by the name of 'Merl' resides here," the receiver crackled. "Apparently you have the wrong number." There was a sharp click—and the line was dead.

Disbelief held Steve in a cold grip for a moment. Then he rattled the receiver up and down and shouted, "Operator! Trace that call. This is Steve Mallory of the *Evening Herald*. I was speaking to Merl Blair and was cut off."

The operator responded quickly. Although strict rules prohibited the tracing of calls for anyone but a police officer, the names of Steve Mallory and Merl Blair were as good as a badge number at this moment, for every man and woman in New York knew of the girl's disappearance.

Soon her voice came back to him: "The call was from Parkway 2384, at Dr. Eric Sturvison's Rest Home on Long Island, near Bridgehampton."

IT TOOK Steve Mallory just five minutes to leave the office, find his car, get a patrolman from a street corner, and head for Long Island. The car flashed through traffic dangerously, cutting through holes scarcely large enough for motorcycles, skidding around corners, skipping stop signals. Patrolman Murphy sat on the edge of his seat,

his big hands gripping the upholstery, his eyes bugging out at the narrow escapes.

When they had reached the comparatively open stretches of Long Island, he relaxed a little. But not for an instant did Steve let up. His body was tense and keyed-up, his face chiseled into sharp lines of determination.

Murphy got his breath long enough to ask a few questions. All he had known when Steve picked him up was that he was Steve Mallory of the *Herald*, and that he was very much in the news right now, as the fiance of the missing girl. Now he queried him about his theory regarding the girl's disappearance.

Steve told him curtly what he feared. He saw a strange look come into Murphy's face as he asked, "You mean this bird's been—sort of swapping heads around?"

Mallory nodded, said, "I'm not crazy, if that's what you're thinking. Sturvison's just the man to try something like this. Probably you've forgotten, but just five years ago the medical board took away his license, for trying to do things that left rather a bad taste in their ethical mouths. Besides that, he was mixed up with the disappearance of a young man who never showed up again. Krishner, I think his name was. They suspected him of experimenting on the boy, but nothing ever came of it."

"Gosh!" Murphy commented, staring at him. His first fear that the reporter was crazy had been swallowed up in another fear—the dread of the unknown. The things Steve had hinted at were sufficient to give him an icy chill in his stomach.

STURVISON'S Rest Home was in an isolated district of low, rocky knolls and scattered clumps of trees, dipped in black shadows now beneath

the moonless sky. Something in the very homeliness of the lighted windows of the gaunt, gray stone structure whispered danger. Steve tooled the car swiftly up the long, winding drive through lines of rustling trees, the headlights casting long fingers of light over the rough ground. Against the black sky the gray building loomed blockily, spires of an earlier architecture thrusting up sharply.

The gravel crunched loudly beneath the tires as Mallory ground to a stop. In a flash he had sprung out and was rounding the car. For just a fraction of a second he paused to glance up at the sanitarium before he had passed out of the beam of the headlights. His body stiffened at the shadow that came and went on the curtain of an upstairs window. The figure was the stooped, disheveled one of an aged woman.

In the next moment he had dashed up the steps behind Murphy and was ringing the doorbell furiously. Presently there came the sound of shuffling footfalls, and then a little window in the door was opened. A craggy, stupid face showed in the aperture. Murphy's flashlight stabbed through the square entrance, spilling a dazzling beam in the man's face.

"What you want?" the man asked slowly.

"We want in, brother—and quick!" Murphy growled.

The pale eyes showed fear as they shifted from one man to the other, trying to make out their faces through the dazzling light. Suddenly he raised his hand to slam the window shut.

But Murphy was ready for the move. The blue barrel of a Police Positive shoved through the window squarely in the man's face. "Now open up," he snapped, "before this thing goes off."

After a second there was the grating of a lock, and the door inched inward.

Steve shoved through brusquely. His eyes swept the interior of the place, noting the ancient oak paneling, the high ceiling, the antiquated furniture. But above the room somewhere there was the humming of powerful electric motors, hinting at things that were modern—and dangerous.

"Where is she?" Mallory asked tensely, seizing the man by the shirt front.

"I show you," the gigantic assistant replied after a pause, looking down at the reporter, whom he could have felled with a single blow. He turned and shuffled off to a flight of stairs that led off to the right.

Side by side, Mallory and the officer followed him. Not for a second did the revolver waver from its line on the man's back. At the top of the stairs they were led down a short hall to the left. The giant stopped before a door and knocked.

A man's voice came through the door almost immediately. "Who was it, Krishner?"

Mallory growled, before the man could enter, "Tell him it was somebody that was lost."

Krishner echoed stupidly, "Somebody was lost. Gone now."

"Good!" the man's voice came back. "I was—a little afraid, for a minute." The door swung open to reveal a large, broad-shouldered man in a white surgeon's smock. He was holding a small metal disk in his hand, toying nervously with it. Abruptly, an oath slipped through his lips as he saw the uniformed figure of Murphy. "You damned fool, Krishner!" he gasped. "You said——"

His words were cut off in his throat as Steve Mallory's fist smashed into his face. The big reporter came through the door close behind him as he fell to the floor. He reached down and scooped him up by the collar. "Where

is she, you butcher?" he choked. "What have you done to her?"

Dr. Sturvison's green eyes shuttled back and forth from officer to reporter, trying to discern just how much they knew. His face became pale, except where Steve's knuckles had brought a red bruise out on his cheek-bone. Suddenly he whirled at the sound of a step at his left. From the little supply alcove across the laboratory stepped an old woman—but on her shoulders was the head of a lovely young girl!

IN a flash, Steve Mallory had sprung to her side, and was gripping her hands. He recoiled as the cold, wrinkled flesh came in contact with his palms. Merl stiffened and took a step backwards. "I don't believe I know you, Mr.——?" Her dark blue eyes searched his face.

"Merl!" Steve gasped. "What's happened to you? Don't you remember me?"

There was no trace of recognition in her face.

Suddenly the boy turned and walked back to the trio standing by the door. "Give me the gun, Murphy," he breathed. "I'm going to blast this butcher where he belongs. I'm going to send him straight to hell, where he can begin paying for the things he's done." He was trembling and white, and his voice shook.

"If you weren't so blind," Sturvison said quietly, "you might realize what you will do by killing me." Only the twitching of his right eye denoted the struggle for mastery that was taking place within him.

Mallory stopped with his hand extended for the revolver. A taut silence built up between them. Krishner still stood quietly watching the proceedings. Murphy's face was rock-hard and emotionless. Sturvison eyed the young re-

porter steadily.

Again he spoke. "You would like to see your fiancée returned to normal, wouldn't you? Very well, it can be done. By me—and by no one else!"

Steve blinked. His face, dark with fury, showed only bewilderment for a moment. Then, like ice breaking up in a spring stream, the meaning of Sturvison's words came to him. New hope sprang up in him with a surge that made him tremble. By Sturvison's own admission, the girl could have her own lovely body restored to her! Scarcely able to control his emotion, he snapped, "Then do it, for Lord's sake! And if you're trying some kind of trick on us, we'll butcher you worse than any of your patients ever were!"

Sturvison smiled bleakly as he turned. "There is no need for threats," he told him. "However, not even threats will make me perform the operation without your promise on one thing. I must be released as soon as the operation is finished!"

Steve hesitated for just a second. Then he nodded, "All right. But whether you get caught later or not doesn't enter into it."

"I'm not worrying about that," the scientist smiled. He turned and strode across the floor towards the big metal door across from them. He shot an order at Krishner, and the giant shambled into the sub-floor operating room to prepare the instruments.

While they waited, the two men looked the place over incredulously. The gruesome scene in the alcove filled with bowls and bell-jars made both of them a little shaky. Steve avoided looking at the girl who was wandering aimlessly about. It was more than he could stand to see the ghastly thing that had been done.

Sturvison emerged from the small room in a moment, carrying a tray on

which was the sheet-draped body of a woman. Mallory's heart struck one wild beat at the sight. The scientist hurried into the operating chamber and laid the body on one of the tables. He pulled the sheet down to expose the head of a hag! Steve was horrified—until he recalled that the old woman's head was fixed to the torso of a young girl.

Krishner, at Sturvison's command, moved away to bring the Van Gogh woman into the room. While he was occupied with this duty, the scientist laid out masks, instruments, and other paraphernalia. Steve was surprised to see no antiseptics or any sign of curative agents. "Isn't there an awful chance of infection?" he asked hurriedly. "An operation like that must take days to heal."

Sturvison shook his head. "The antiseptics I use is a gas," he explained. "And as far as healing is concerned—it takes place in a matter of minutes. The stupid plan of dressing a wound and letting nature take its course is what has made surgery such a dangerous necessity, but I have found a way around it. Using as a basis the fact that radium has remarkable curative powers, I developed my own curative. Placed about the wound in the form of tape, it hastens coagulation and the formation of serum. These two factors, of course, are the primary considerations in healing. Thus, with the usual three days exudation of serum taking place in ten seconds, the rest of the process is finished very quickly."

A DISTURBING thought filtered into Steve's mind. Why wouldn't Merl's mind still be almost blank after the operation? Could the mere transferring of a head from one body to the other cause the mind to be altered? Almost afraid of the answer he might

receive, he asked tensely, "But how will her mind ever become normal again? Isn't she under some hallucination?"

The scientist looked up from his lashing the bodies to the tables. He shot a glance at the lumbering form of Krishner. "You will have Krishner to thank for her being entirely normal when the operation is finished," he responded. "He is hardly the finished workman my work requires of assistants. Krishner, to be quite frank, is one of my earlier failures. He is an excellent imitator, ordinarily, but on this occasion he slipped. Unless the subject's brain is completely deadened at the time of the transfer, the mind remains unaltered. However, if the anaesthetic—radio-chloride, in this instance—is imperfectly administered, the mind retains all its former memories. This is where Krishner failed. He administered a dilute solution of the anaesthetic. The girl was almost normal when she came out of it. The little metal disk I was holding when you came in was part of my plan to remedy that situation. Only hypnotism is effective after the operation. My attempts so far have been only partially successful."

He broke off now and handed the assistant a mask. In silence they donned them. Anaesthetics were administered, the dosage given to the girl being a very slight one. Steve found himself becoming more tense every second, frightened by a hundred fears. Was Sturvison really telling them the truth? Or was this a plan of his to trick them? Another consideration galled him. The price of Merl's safety was turning this unscrupulous surgeon loose on the world again, to subject other young girls to the same brutal treatment. The boy's heart and mind waged a bitter fight while he waited for the men in the room below to com-

mence the work.

At last the thick glass shield was slipped into place. Immediately, the hissing of escaping gas came to the ears of the watchers. Green billows of semi-transparent vapor swept through the small room, making the figures below indistinct, moving shapes.

Murphy's breathing became audible to Steve, as it rasped through set teeth. His own mouth was dry as cotton, his eyes wide in fearful anticipation. Alone in the big room, they crouched at the edge of the pit and stared down at a scene only the two men below them had ever witnessed before.

Then, over the hissing of the gas, a sharp order reached their ears: "*Now!*"

CHAPTER V

Back from Death

STEVE flinched, looked away in sudden horror. He found he could not watch what might result in a ghastly surgical nightmare. The very thought of a knife slicing cruelly through Merl's neck caused him to shudder.

Through the thick glass came the sound of a sharp click, as of a spring being released. There was the brief hum of a motor—and then silence. The reporter and the cop stood in tense silence, waiting—for what? Life, and sanity, for a young girl, who meant more to Steve than life itself? Or a horrible death, or still worse—the living death of insanity? A few seconds' wait would tell them.

Soon the green fog began to thin. The cloud of vapor became a thinning veil between watchers and operating tables. Then, as powerful fans drew the last of the antiseptic gas from the chamber, the scene was revealed!

A glad cry escaped Steve's lips. Merl Blair lay on the table exactly as though

she were sleeping, her face relaxed in sleep that was not the endless sleep she had so nearly escaped. Her face was flushed with blood pumping through her cheeks, her lips parted to expose white teeth. Beneath the coverings over her body, her breasts rose and fell regularly. The effects of artificially induced suspended animation had worn off completely.

Only a thin red line on the girl's throat denoted the operation that had taken place. And even as they watched, Sturvison bound a wide strip of yellow tape about it.

On the other table lay the wrinkled body of an old woman. Her face was pouchy and toothless, the eyes closed. The wealthy old crone had had the beauty she sought for two days, and now, by a justice that had caught up with her, she was again the hag that long years had made her.

The scientist and his helper took off the gas masks. Krishner slid the glass shield back and went up the stairs. Sturvison paused, before ascending, to take some papers from a shelf in the wall. Then he came up from the operating room to the two men who waited.

Murphy still stood looking in amazement down at the girl. Steve looked white and shaky, too, as though he had come through a terrific ordeal. Sturvison stood for a moment smiling at them, contemptuously. His right eye twitched nervously.

In the next moment, without any warning, he sprang forward. His left hand smashed into the side of Krishner's head as he dived at Murphy. The giant uttered a single, piercing shriek as he toppled over the edge of the pit. Steve's startled eyes caught a glimpse of him as he struck the floor with a thud.

An oath crowded the cop's lips. He fell back as the surprise rush carried

him off his feet and dumped him on the floor. The gun skittered off across the cement.

In a flash Sturvison had swept it up and swung it on the two men. "You are very trusting," he taunted. "If you thought I trusted you as much as you did me, you were mistaken. I knew I would have no chance of leaving here alone. Nor will you leave, to expose me and end my work!"

A wave of anger shook Mallory. He took one step towards the scientist and clenched his fists in impotent rage. "You won't get far!" he raged. "They'll trap you somehow. They can trace that phone call and find you."

"But when they get here," Sturvison snarled, "there will be no bodies, nor any other traces to convict me. After the investigation, I will simply move somewhere else and continue my work." His greenish eyes mocked the boy's anger.

Murphy was muttering in self-condemnation and bitter regrets. "I mighta known a half-baked scientist like you would try somethin' funny," he ground out savagely. "If I could get hold o' that gun for one second——"

THE big cop broke off angrily. But it was not entirely anger that caused the torrent of words to dry up. For at that moment both he and Steve Mallory noticed something crawling up from the operating room. Their eyes widened at the sight of the bloody, hulking figure of Krishner. A mad light gleamed in his eyes, and his hands clenched and unclenched.

Sturvison stopped short, looked at the two men. His shrewd brain read danger in their faces. Some warning sound whirled him about. In a flash he saw his position. "Krishner!" he shouted. "Go back in the pit! Go back, or I'll shoot you!"

The giant's face twisted in sullen fury as he wiped a big paw across his bloody mouth. He mumbled something unintelligible, and came on. His long arms hung limply, but the blocky shoulders testified to their gorilla-like power.

"Go back!" the scientist warned again. "One step more and I'll kill you!"

Krishner's lips formed a harsh, mocking laugh. Without a pause, he sham-bled on.

The gun in Sturvison's hand crashed once. Krishner jerked as the bullet smashed into his shoulder. A ragged hole appeared in the white smock, and red began to widen slowly about it. But his shambling pace was not stopped. He continued on, his arms raised now to seize the scientist.

Sturvison's face blanched as he squeezed the trigger twice. The gun leaped in his hand as lead sped into Krishner's stomach. A cry of agony came from the assistant but he showed no other effect of the bullets' power. Suddenly he broke into an awkward run and charged at him. Sturvison seemed to shrink down as he gripped the gun and emptied it, in three final blasts of gun-fire, into the body of the giant.

He shrieked as Krishner grabbed him in a vicious hug. The gun beat futilely against the helper's head, bringing a torrent of blood down the man's face but only serving to enrage him still further.

Krishner's big hands sought his throat. With an animal growl, he held the creator of his ill-formed being out at arm's length and shook him as a cat shakes a mouse. The scientist dangled loosely. His face went blue from the vise-like grip that was choking the life from him, and his eyes bugged out horribly. And still the giant continued to squeeze harder and harder. His fin-

gers dug into the soft throat until they had all but disappeared in folds of flesh.

Suddenly the big hands relaxed. Krishner twisted about to look at the two men who stood stock-still watching the drama. After a moment he slid to the floor. Sturvison's body fell across him, his neck broken. His own monster, that he had created to enslave other helpless men and women, had caused his downfall.

Steve and Murphy stared for a long five seconds at the huddled shapes on the floor before they moved. Then the cop muttered, "What a cop that guy woulda made! A slug didn't faze him any more'n a pea-shooter would."

But Steve was staring at the papers clutched in his right hand, which he had taken from the shelf in the pit. "The secret of his process," he murmured. "He was probably going to destroy them and deprive humanity of a blessing that might never have been discovered again. His own greed made a horror out of the secret that could have saved countless lives if he had given it to science. Krishner will never know, poor, stupid monster that he was, what he did for others as pitiful as he."

For a moment longer he stared at them, and then he shook off the spell and went hurriedly down the steps into the operating room. Merl was looking about dazedly when he bent over her. Her eyes fastened on him in terror—and then they softened and a film of tears came over them.

"Steve!" she whispered, in the voice he had grown to love. "What—what happened, Steve? I remember a man talking to me on the street, and then—then it all seems a blank."

Relief made Steve Mallory's knees shaky as he heard the girl's voice. His eyes were on the strip of tape about her throat. Beneath it, he knew, the miracle

was taking place that had given her back to him. After a moment he said, "Let's just say that nothing has happened, dear. All that matters now is

that you're all right—and that tomorrow night at eight we're going to take up right where we left off the other day!"

THE END

(cont. from page 45)

"Yes, yes. It's perfect. And you heard me last night? When I talked about what you should do?"

"I MUST have. Tell me, Joe, are we crazy? People who hear voices are crazy, aren't they?"

"Crazy or lucky, I guess. Can I come over and see you, honey?"

"Of course." Her voice broke into a gentle laugh. "I want to talk to you."

"I've got more on my mind than conversation," Joe said.

"I guess I have too." Her voice sounded small and a trifle guilty.

"I'll see you in ten minutes."

"Joe, please hurry."

Joe put the phone down and reached for his hat. He smiled down at the picture of Sylvia and a voice said, "Darling, isn't it wonderful?"

Joe looked hard at the picture, but her lips hadn't moved. It was just a

picture.

He turned slowly. Mona was standing in the door, a bright smile on her face, wearing a pink coat over slacks and bright yellow blouse.

"Isn't what wonderful?" he asked.

"The book, darling. I just read about it in Winchell. He says it's going to be terrific. I just knew you could do it, darling."

"Did you?"

"Of course, darling." She smiled and opened her arms invitingly. "And what are you going to do for me now, honey?"

"I'm going to send you an autographed copy," Joe said. He brushed past her and went down the steps two at a time. Mona was shouting something after him that sounded very unlady-like, but he wasn't bothered.

He went out into the gray overcast morning and started waving for a cab.

He realized it was a beautiful day.

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Miner Crisis On Io

by Guy Archette

GENE PAIGE trundled the laden wheelbarrow past the long rows of piled ore, his breath pluming in the cold air of Io. Reaching the end, he dumped the contents of the wheelbarrow upon a small but growing mound and straightened his aching back slowly. Though weariness grooved the youthful lines of his face, his gray eyes glowed with satisfaction as he

glanced about him.

It was a good haul, he could see that. In great demand as a refractory lining for rocket tubes, tungsten brought fancy prices. To Gene Paige, however, the rows of dully gleaming mounds meant more than this. They meant more workers, better equipment, the chance to branch out.

His lips thinned in a grim smile as





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Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined
That Cigarette Smoking Is Dangerous to Your Health.

Gene kept the tungsten and threw
away the vulcanium—it was keeping
the squeals and junking the pigs . .



he thought of still another meaning. Softly he whispered, "Too dependent, eh? Well, you're soon going to eat those words, Strike!"

But as yet, soon seemed a long way off. Paige almost wished Strike were here now. He would have liked to see his father's face as the latter took in the marching hills of tungsten ore. Strike Paige—or more formally, Ogden Paige, the dynamic, two-fisted owner of Solar Mining and Metals Company—would quickly have lost his smug assurance in Gene's incompetency.

Righting the wheelbarrow, Paige started back toward the mine opening. His weighted boots moved in the shuffling steps it was necessary to employ, in the lighter gravity of Io, to prevent an annoying tendency to bound. He had pushed back from his head the fur-lined hood of his heat-suit, and his crisp, brown hair riffled in the thin, frigid wind. Exposure had tanned to a deep brown his lean, toil-graven face, and his slender hands were rough and chapped and padded with thick callouses on the palms.

Limning jagged peaks on the horizon, the vast orb of Jupiter hung like a gigantic sun. Unlike a sun, however, its brightness was due mostly to the reflecting qualities of its tremendously thick atmosphere. It radiated but little heat; the temperature of Io, when hidden behind its primary, fell far below zero. Right now, though, Io was on the sunward side, and the temperature was thirty above.

The mine was situated at one end of a large valley, rimmed by wind-carved rock pinnacles. The air here was considerably more dense than at higher altitude, which even at that time left it more tenuous than the air on a mountain-top of Earth. Dwarf-like trees, reddish and gnarled, covered the valley floor, interspersed with vivid

yellow and green shrubs and patches of violet moss. These touches of colorful vegetation did much to relieve the harshness of the rugged terrain.

AS PAIGE neared the mine opening, a wheelbarrow-pushing figure emerged. It was old Paddy Harton. Behind him, a pick dragging in his hands, came Hank Smith. The two moved with visible evidence of exhaustion. Heavy work, such as mining, under the alien conditions of atmosphere, temperature, and gravity of Io was made even more difficult.

Paige glanced in sympathy from Paddy Harton to Hank Smith. They were an oddly opposite pair. Paddy was a garrulous, elderly miner who had seen better days. Stooped and gaunt, he was bald as a wind-swept rock. Smith was short and thick-set, hairy as a *Glatk*, one of the bear-like, intelligent natives of Titan. He spoke only when spoken to, and even then in the shortest of sentences. Paige didn't know what Smith had been before hiring him. Certainly not a miner, as his clumsiness with tools testified.

"You fellows can knock off for the rest of the day," Paige said. "It's almost near the end of our work period anyway."

"Glad 'o that," Paddy wheezed. "I couldn't keep goin' much longer. Guess I got to admit I'm gettin' old, dang it!" As though indignant of that fact, he pursed his wrinkled lips and violently expectorated tobacco juice.

Hank Smith sat down on a nearby rock and stared contemplatively at the ground. He managed to give the impression of being politely interested, but as usual he said nothing. A thick black beard covered the lower half of his face.

Paige said, "Well, don't worry, Paddy. You won't have to slave like

this much longer. When I sell this ore, I'm going to buy extraction machinery. Then, if you keep working for me, all you'll have to do is keep it going."

"Sounds right fine to me," Paddy agreed. "Guess I'll stick around. How 'bout you, Hank?"

The other glanced up briefly, then said, "Don't know. Maybe."

"Think it over, Hank," Paige suggested. "If you stay, of course, you'll get a raise in pay, in addition to having to do less work, with us using machinery." The invitation was made more out of fairness than anything else. Smith was a hard worker, but Paige had no especial liking for the taciturn man. Neither had Paddy, he knew. Several times, Paddy had mentioned having a vague distrust of Smith. Something about him bothered Paige also, but just what it was, he couldn't have told with exactness.

Paige made a gesture of dismissing the subject. He said, "I'll get supper ready. If I remember correctly, it's my turn to do the cooking."

CHAPTER II

HE TURNED and strode toward the box-like prefabricated cabin a short distance from the mine, which served as living quarters. Halfway there, a low snuffle sounded; he stopped to watch the bounding approach of a creature which to the uninitiated would have looked like a nightmare.

Paige grinned and stooped. "Hello, Sandy! Where have you been all day? Flirting with the ladies, I'll bet."

Sandy said, "Hess!" which was the closest he could get to the word yes, and plucked at Paige's hands with long-clawed forepaws. The little Ioan sand-hog had a parrot-like ability to repeat words. Unlike a parrot, however, Paige

was certain that Sandy understood.

Sandy was the highest form of life on Io. The size of a small dog, he had a doughnut-shaped body covered with armor-like red plates. From the middle of this rose a long, scaly yellow neck at the end of which bobbed a head like that of an amiable, diminutive dragon. Sandy had six legs—four to run on, and two for digging up the minerals which composed his diet.

Finishing his examination of Paige's hands, Sandy's amber eyes clouded in disappointment. "Sikkyon!" he demanded, his piping tones peremptory.

"Silicon, eh?" Paige grinned. "You're getting too darned dependent on me, old fellow. Pretty soon I'll have to cuss you up and down and make you root for yourself, just like Strike did to me." But Paige reached into a pocket for the small pieces of silicate mineral which he collected for Sandy's consumption. They were in the nature of a delicacy to the little sand-hog.

Snout quivering ecstatically, Sandy seized the rocky tidbits and popped them into his mouth. The powerful, acid-like secretions of his digestive system would reduce the mineral quickly to assimilable form.

At last Sandy gave a sigh of repletion and considered his surroundings with reawakened interest. He turned to scuttle away upon some suddenly remembered mission.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Paige called. "What do you say for that meal I gave you?"

Sandy wiggled his snout, pondering. "Wanks!" he said finally. Then he slid between two rocks and was gone.

"Thoughtless little rascal!" Paige grinned. He straightened and set out once more for the cabin.

PAIGE, Paddy Harton, and Hank Smith were finishing supper in the

cabin mess room, when a sound of muted thunder abruptly broke the quiet. Paige stiffened, recognizing the blast of a descending rocket.

"Somebody's comin'!" Paddy said tensely.

Grabbing up the electro-bolt rifle which he kept always ready in his room, Paige hurried to a window. He was in time to see a trim runabout settle on the flaming pillar of its underjets, in a small clearing some twenty yards away. It was a small craft, with barely enough room for two persons, but Paige knew miners in lonely places like the frontiers of Io couldn't take chances with strangers. Bandits were numerous and thriving. And despite the fact that Cass Rudler, the most notorious of the space brigands, had through the efforts of the Interplanetary Rangers ceased to be a menace, there remained still a horde of lesser desperadoes.

As Paige watched, the runabout touched ground, and the underjets were cut. A moment of inactivity; then the outer door of the airlock slid open. Paige stared as a trim figure in a modish heat-suit emerged. It was a girl. A slim, pretty girl, with copper-hued curls gleaming beneath her hood.

"A danged woman!" Paddy sniffed. "Wonder what she wants?"

"I'm going to find out," Paige said. He handed over the rifle. "You keep me covered, Paddy. This girl may be bait for a trap."

Paige climbed rapidly into his heat-suit, buckled on his weighted boots, and strode outside. The girl greeted his appearance with a quick smile and walked forward to meet him. He eyed her suspiciously. Since the Twentieth Century, women had taken an increasingly large share in world affairs, until now their competition in all fields was unusually keen. Notwithstanding her prettiness, Paige knew the girl could be

anything—even a pirate.

Presently they faced each other across a distance of several paces. The girl was the first to speak.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Susan M. Durand, a mining scout, with offices in Placer City. Here are my credentials."

Paige accepted the extended papers and leafed through them. There was a license bearing the seal of the Interplanetary Bureau of Mines, containing the girl's photograph, fingerprints, and a description of her physical appearance; various letters of recommendation from well-known mining concerns; and photostats of university degrees in geology and metallurgy. Paige relaxed his wariness. He even wished that he had taken time to shave that morning. He handed the papers back and said:

"My name's Gene Paige. What can I do for you?"

In the act of lighting a cigarette, Susan M. Durand stared. "Did you say Paige?"

He nodded, slightly puzzled at her reaction. After a moment she shrugged. She finished lighting her cigarette, blew a plume of smoke, and smiled again.

"About my visit, Mr. Paige, I happened to be returning from a business trip when I noticed your mine. You have a nice output of ore. Is it for sale, or are you already committed? If it's for sale, I have a list of buyers."

Paige inclined his head, striving hard not to seem eager. "It's for sale. I'd been intending to contact an agent in Placer City. You might be able to save me the trouble."

"Perhaps, Mr. Paige. What are you mining?"

"Tungsten ore."

"What grade?"

PAIGE hesitated. "Well . . . I'm afraid I don't know. It . . . it's

just tungsten." He was discomfited to reveal his ignorance of ore gradings. He was a miner by impulse rather than training.

Susan M. Durand suppressed a grin. "Do you mind if I take a look at some samples?"

"Of course not," Paige agreed quickly. "Go right ahead." He watched interestedly as the girl selected specimens from several of the nearest mounds. She examined them, frowning. At last she shook her copper curls.

"What's the matter?" Paige asked in apprehension.

"This isn't tungsten, Mr. Paige. It's vulcanium."

"Not tungsten! But . . . but that's all right, isn't it? There's a market for vulcanium?"

Susan M. Durand moved her head in a slow negative, her blue eyes soft with sympathy. "Vulcanium is worthless," she said.

"Worthless!" Paige echoed gaspingly. He had suddenly the feeling that Io had plunged from under him. He gestured in dismay at the gleaming mounds of ore which ran in long rows down to the mine entrance. "You mean to tell me that this—all this—isn't worth anything?"

The girl was emphatic. "I mean just what I said, Mr. Paige. I know ores when I see them."

The rugged landscape whirled crazily before Paige's eyes. He sat weakly on a nearby rock, thinking of the months of grueling work it had taken to amass the long rows of piled ore—months of work that could now be counted off as sheer waste. He felt sick. Then he thought of the delight with which his father would receive the news of his humiliation, and felt still sicker.

"You made a pretty bad mistake, Mr. Paige," Susan M. Durand said.

"But in a way you can't be blamed. Vulcanium is greatly like tungsten in appearance, and its discovery is so recent that few miners have learned to tell the difference."

"But what's wrong with it?" Paige demanded. "Why hasn't it any value?"

"Simply because no commercial uses for it have as yet been found. It's a new element, you know. Scientists are still experimenting with it." The girl studied Paige commiseratingly, and when he remained despairingly silent, she glanced finally at her wrist chronometer. "Well, I'll have to be running along. Sorry we couldn't do business, Mr. Paige. Here is my card. If I can do anything for you, don't hesitate to let me know."

"Thanks," Paige muttered. He took the plastic oblong, and watched dully as Susan M. Durand climbed into her runabout and blasted off. The roar of jets died away as the vessel shot toward Placer City, the business hub of Io. Susan M. Durand was gone, but memory of her blue eyes and coppery hair remained vividly in Paige's mind.

Paddy Harton and Hank Smith were crowding the doorway when Paige returned to the cabin. Paddy took in Paige's woebegone expression and burst into a flood of questions.

"What happened? What did that danged female want? What did she say?"

Paige scrutinized the tips of his weighted boots. "She was a mining scout from Placer City. Came to have a look at the ore."

"Well, what d'you know! Is she goin' to buy it?"

"No, Paddy, the ore isn't tungsten as we thought, but vulcanium. And vulcanium isn't worth anything."

"Vulcanium!" Paddy's stained, scraggly teeth bit hard into the cud of chewing tobacco which bulged one

leathery cheek. He stared at Paige in disbelieving horror. "You mean . . . you mean we worked eight months for nothin'?"

"I'm afraid so, Paddy."

"But what about our pay—mine and Hank's? How you goin' to pay us?"

Paige shrugged heavily. "I don't know right now. But give me a little time, I'll find a way."

PADDY HARTON considered this dubiously. He emitted a stream of tobacco juice and glanced at Hank Smith. But the thick-set, taciturn man didn't seem to be interested in the problem. As usual, he stared silently at the ground, wrapped deep in thoughts of his own.

A strained quiet fell.

Paige unselfishly forgot his own troubles to feel sorry for the two. He had intended to pay them from sale of the ore, and with that having turned out to be worthless, he didn't know what he was going to do. Except for his father, he couldn't think of anyone who would loan him the large amount of money required. Susan M. Durand, of course, had extended an offer to help, but his masculine pride automatically excluded that from consideration. And Strike was the last person in the System Paige intended to ask.

His mouth twisted wryly as he recalled the noisy quarrel he'd had with his father in the latter's office over a year ago. The elder Paige, a self-made man, had started it by denouncing as shiftless the present generation of youth in general and Gene in particular.

"You'll never amount to anything!" Strike had snapped. "You're too dependent, that's the trouble. Why, if it wasn't for me, I wonder what you'd be doing now?"

"I'd get along!" Gene had shot back.

"Yeah? Doing what? Filling blast

holes at some space port, I suppose, or putting robots together in a factory."

"At least I'd have some responsibility. I'll admit you've given me an office of my own and a large salary besides—but there's never any work for me to do. The money you pay me is more an allowance than anything else, because you don't trust me to handle part of the business."

Strike had leaned forward over his great desk, stabbing his words with a thick forefinger. "You've got to prove yourself, that's what! You've got to show me you have what it takes! You've got to start from the bottom and work your way up like I did—from pick and shovel to padded chair. I couldn't respect any man who did otherwise."

Gene had flushed angrily. "You mean I'm no good unless I duplicate your stunts? Well, that shouldn't be so hard—I'd set new records!"

This had stung Strike to the quick. His youthful feats were not to be slighted. "Like hell you could!" he had roared. "You haven't guts enough for that!"

"Haven't I? I'll show you, then! I'll make you eat those words, Strike!"

The office door had slammed loudly behind Gene as he'd stalked furiously out. With a stubborn set to his jaw and a mere eight-hundred credits in his pocket, he had sallied forth to make his own fortune.

Now Paige thought dismally of how well he had succeeded. He shuddered as he visualized how his father would gloat over his failure. He'd never be able to face the other again, for always there would be a mocking, I-told-you-so expression on Strike's features.

Paige sighed and returned his attention to Paddy and Hank Smith. He said wearily, "You fellows might as well take it easy from now on. There's

no sense in doing any more work. As for me, I'm going to think this out."

CHAPTER III

THREE days, Earth time, passed, but Paige was no nearer a solution. He had become lost in a maze of despair.

He was seated on the rim of a wheelbarrow near the mine entrance, sunk deep in brooding. Squatting in front of him was Sandy, head cocked to one side in an attitude of perplexity. Sandy had never known the Boss to act like this before.

"Sikkyon?" Sandy queried plaintively, for the fourth time.

Awareness of the little sand-hog stirred dully in Paige's eyes. He spread his hands impatiently. "No silicon! See?" He waved his empty palms. "No silicon. I've got more important things to think about than to keep filled that acid vat you use for a stomach."

Forced to accept what seemed to him a bewildering contradiction, Sandy rose. "Dang it!" he piped. With a hurt glance at Paige, he ambled away.

As he settled himself again, Paige abruptly became aware of a roaring sound from somewhere overhead. He glanced up to see a rocket approach. It was flying low, and at first he thought it would pass over the valley. But as he watched, he saw it dip, retarding forejets bursting into flame. It came down on a long slant, growing larger, the roar of its jets deeper. It was heading for the mine, Paige realized shortly.

He dismissed thought of danger with a shrug. He didn't have anything worth taking.

The rocket came down on its underjets. Paige saw now that it was a small runabout model, like the one owned by Susan M. Durand. If it was the girl's,

he wondered why she should be returning.

Presently the craft bumped to a landing. As Paige approached, the outer airlock door slid open and a figure in a heat-suit jumped lithely to the ground. His pulse leaped in sudden excitement. It was Susan M. Durand!

"Hello, Mr. Paige," she greeted. "How's everything?"

"Fine," Paige lied. "Just fine." He shifted awkwardly, abruptly conscious of his untidy, neglected appearance.

If Susan M. Durand noticed, she gave no indication of having done so. She said briskly, "I suppose you're wondering why I'm back. Well, I'll get down to business without any further social amenities. Mr. Paige, have you entered into contract with anyone yet about the sale of your ore?"

Paige shook his head slowly. "Who'd want to buy it anyway?"

"A market for vulcanium has just developed, Mr. Paige. You see, the discovery was announced shortly after my last visit of a new vulcanium compound which makes a vastly improved and efficient rocket fuel. As might be expected, the importance of vulcanium has become suddenly tremendous. Mining concerns are wildly trying to find deposits or corner those already known. The various rocket lines are fighting tooth and nail to obtain first supplies. Frantic bidding is taking place at all exchanges, and the value of vulcanium—"

The girl broke off as Paddy and Hank Smith approached. The two had been playing quadrants in the cabin, and doubtlessly had noticed that something unusual was afoot. Paige introduced the pair, then gestured eagerly for the girl to continue.

"Well, the value of vulcanium has skyrocketed. Nothing like it has been seen since the discovery of virgin gold

deposits on Mars. Mr. Paige, I'm prepared to buy your ore for three-hundred credits an Earth-ton."

"What!" Paige gasped.

"Awrrkhi!" said Paddy, who had swallowed his cud of chewing tobacco.

Even Hank Smith's usually dull eyes lighted up.

SUSAN M. DURAND went on, "This sum is considerably above the current market price, Mr. Paige. I am able to do this because you have a large quantity of vulcanium already mined. It's really a wonderful opportunity for you, since what you have here is ore rather than the pure metal."

"It certainly is!" Paige agreed. He rubbed his jaw a moment, frowning. "I'm not the kind to look for price tags on a gift, but this seems a little irregular. Just whom are you representing, Miss Durand?"

"A large and well-known mining concern which has offices in Thanokis, on Mars."

"But what is the name of it?"

The girl dropped her eyes to her gloved hands. "Is it really necessary for you to know that? I assure you, there's nothing dishonest about this. Your money will be paid promptly and fully. For business reasons, the concern I'm acting for desires to remain anonymous."

Paige's frown deepened. He didn't like the mystery surrounding the transaction. If it had been suggested to him by anyone else than Susan M. Durand, he'd have felt certain that he was being drawn into a swindle.

"You needn't hesitate," the girl reassured. "Except for the identity of the concern I'm acting for, everything is quite on the level."

Paige abruptly nodded. "I'll sell—but for five-hundred a ton."

"Why, that's ridiculous! Three-hun-

dred was high enough, considering that the market at present is beneath that amount. You're not being sensible, Mr. Paige."

"I know it. But I'm taking a chance on the market rising to my figure. If it does, I'll get five-hundred from other agents—maybe more."

The girl bit her lip. She shrugged.

"All right, then, five-hundred it is. Where can we draw up the contract, Mr. Paige?"

Paige turned and led the way to the cabin. Only the presence of the girl kept him from yelling in sheer joy. He hadn't failed after all. He'd show Strike yet!

Now he'd be able to pay off Paddy and Hank and buy extraction machinery. He was familiar with Io, and it would not be difficult to locate further deposits of vulcanium. He would be able to branch out, operate three or more mines at the same time. Things were looking up.

And mentally, Paige decided that he was going to do a lot of business with Susan M. Durand in the future. Very little of it, however, would have to do with mining.

In the cabin, Paige cleared the table of the colored quadrant pieces which Paddy and Hank had been using. Susan took a chair, producing from a pocket of her heat-suit a sheaf of papers and a pen. She got no further than this, for the sudden thunder of a departing rocket arrested all sound and motion.

Paige felt a cold wind abruptly sweep through him. He stared at Susan, and she stared back at him. Then as one, they leaped to a window.

"My ship!" Susan cried. "Somebody's taken it!"

"It was Hank Smith, that's who it was!" Paddy snapped. "He was with us a few minutes ago. Now he's gone."

"But what in space did he run off

like that for?" Paige muttered, frowning at the sky, where the runabout was swiftly dwindling to a speck.

"He's up to no good," Paddy decided forebodingly. "You know I never trusted him. He heard about the vulcanium—and now he's skeedaddled."

Susan asked, "Haven't you a ship of your own, Mr. Paige? If you have, you could go to Placer City and warn the Rangers to be on the watch for him."

Paige shook his head, thinking regretfully of the sleek little space yacht he had abandoned back on Earth. "If Hank Smith's up to some mischief, our only hope is that another mining scout arrives. You may have mentioned to someone that we'd been mining vulcanium under the delusion that it was tungsten, Miss Durand. It certainly was funny enough to bear telling."

"I didn't, though." The girl looked confused. "I don't know just why. Maybe it was because I wished to spare you the embarrassment."

Paige stifled a groan. "That was nice of you."

"Just swell," Paddy put in. "That means we'll still be here when Hank returns for whatever dirty work he's up to."

CHAPTER IV

THERE was nothing to do but wait for what was to happen. An attempt to flee the valley would have availed nothing, since Smith in the runabout would be able easily to find them.

Paige brewed coffee—whether out of a desire to be hospitable, or to soothe jumpy nerves, he wasn't quite sure. Susan proffered her cigarettes, and she and Paige sipped coffee and smoked in silence.

Grim-faced, Paddy sat at a window and watched the sky. His fingers kept stroking the barrel of Paige's electro-

bolt rifle, which he held in his lap.

Sandy drifted in from one of his obscure ramblings, gaining admission to the cabin by scratching the door. At sight of Susan, Sandy almost bolted away, but the aroma of coffee was too enticing to leave. Besides silicates, there were few gastronomical delicacies Sandy liked better than coffee.

"A sand-hog!" Susan exclaimed. She glanced at Paige admiringly. "You've managed to tame one? They don't take to humans as a rule."

"Not unless the humans are good providers," Paige said. "The way to a sand-hog's heart—if they have hearts—is to find out what it likes, and then supply it in unlimited quantities." He looked down as Sandy clawed appealingly at his boot.

"Coffee!" Sandy begged. "Gimme!"

Susan murmured, "He's cute."

Paige looked up as he poured Sandy a cup of the brew and said nothing, though his eyes, fixed on Susan, were eloquent. The little sand-hog was not without charms of his own, but Paige had other definitions for cute—most of the specifications for which were more than amply filled by Susan M. Durand.

Presently Sandy had his nose in the cup and was sucking away noisily. He didn't finish all the coffee, however. He scurried for cover as the sudden thunder of a descending rocket shattered the silence.

"Smith's back," Paddy said curtly, as Paige and Susan hurried up to his window.

Paige watched tensely as the runabout settled to the ground. After it came a second and larger vessel, a freighter.

"Know what that means?" Paddy asked, indicating the freighter.

Paige nodded dumbly. He knew only too well. The freighter was to serve as a repository for the ore.

The squat figure of Hank Smith emerged from the smaller of the two vessels. A hard-faced, brawny man followed, to remain beside the runabout while Smith walked toward the cabin.

Paddy shifted his cud of tobacco and raised the rifle. "I'm goin' to blast him before he can start anythin'."

"No, wait!" Paige ordered. "Killing Hank won't help matters any. There's still his friends in the freighter. You keep quiet, Paddy. I'm going to talk to Hank."

Paige went to the door and flung it open. A few yards away by now, Hank Smith halted.

"What's this all about, Hank?" Paige asked.

"You'll soon see," the other growled. "You and the others in there, come out with your hands up. My men have orders to top you in the ships, if you try anything."

Paige looked from the runabout to the freighter. The underjets of both were idling. In his mind's eye, he could envision the searing fury of which they were capable. The vessels had only to bring to bear on the cabin the withering blast of their underjets, and within a matter of seconds, everyone within it would be reduced to ashes. Paige could see no way out. To do anything but what Smith commanded was certain to invite death.

"Come out with your hands up," Smith repeated.

PAIGE shrugged fatalistically, and gestured to Paddy and Susan. Paddy seemed to be determined to hold out, but after a moment he shrugged, too. He dropped the electro-bolt rifle to the cabin floor and followed after Paige and the girl as they raised their hands and strode outside in single file.

Smith beckoned to his waiting henchman at the runabout. "Frick, give the

all-clear signal. We can't waste any time in loading the ore. Somebody may show up." For the first time since his reappearance, Smith produced a weapon, a wicked flame pistol. He pointed it at Paige and the others, while Frick wig-wagged the freighter.

Observing the signal, the men in the freighter cut the jets. Shortly they poured out of the airlock. Paige counted six of them.

"The Interplanetary Rangers are going to be after you for stealing my ore, Smith," Paige said grimly. "You should have been satisfied with the wages I intended to pay you."

The other shrugged impatiently. "So what?" he grunted. "The damned Rangers have been after me before. My name ain't Smith—it's Cass Rudler. You missed a swell chance to collect the reward on me by not finding that out before."

Susan gasped. And for the second time that day, Paddy swallowed his chewing tobacco.

Paige felt astonishment flame through him. Cass Rudler! The wiley space brigand whose infamous career the Interplanetary Rangers reportedly had ended. Cass Rudler was still alive! But more than that, Paige couldn't get over the surprise of never once having suspected that the taciturn, bearded Hank Smith and the notorious Cass Rudler were one and the same person. He knew he had failed to make the connection simply because he had, like everyone else, accepted the news of Rudler's apparent death.

"So the Rangers didn't get you after all," Paige told Rudler.

The stocky pirate grinned contemptuously. "You bet they didn't—and never will. Me and a few of the boys got away in a lifeboat from that trap they set. They never knew about the lifeboat, and didn't see it leave be-

cause I had it painted dead black. So they thought I was still inside my ship when they blasted it to pieces."

"But why in space did you take a job as a miner?" Paige asked.

Rudler shrugged. "I was moving my swag from the Asteroids to one of Saturn's moons when the Rangers trapped me. Lost everything. Me and the boys who were left decided to take jobs here on Io, to wait for something to turn up which would help us get back into business. Your ore is going to do that nicely."

"Glad to hear that," Paige murmured sarcastically. He gestured at Frick and the six desperadoes from the freighter. "These are the men who escaped with you in the lifeboat?"

"You guessed it. They were on Io all the time. I rounded them up in the girl's ship. We stole a freighter—and here we are." Rudler made a sudden, sharp gesture of finality. "No more gabbing. There's work to do." He indicated two of his men. "Tie 'em up," he ordered, jerking a thumb at Paige, Susan, and Paddy. Rudler turned towards the mine, followed by Frick and the others.

Paige became tense. The two brigands designated by Rudler were uncoiling lengths of rope, momentarily occupied by the task. Rudler and his group had their backs turned as they strode toward the mine. The airlock of the freighter was open.

Paige ignored thought of danger as the desire to take advantage of his fleeting opportunity pulled at him irresistibly. If he could get into the freighter, he could use the underjets as a weapon, incinerate the pirates at practically one stroke.

He exploded into action.

Paige threw himself at the legs of the two pirates before him, the light gravity of Io giving him the speed of

a projectile. They sprawled backward, and Paige pushed himself erect, bound^d toward the freighter. Halfway to it, a rock turned under his pistoning foot. He stumbled, fell, rolled bouncingly along the ground.

Before he could overcome the impetus of his plunge and regain his feet, the two pirates reached him. Their clubbed pistols thudded into his head. He sank into blackness.

CHAPTER V

PAIGE came to with a splitting headache. He tried to raise a hand to his aching skull, but found he couldn't. A moment later he discovered the reason—he had been bound securely.

He glanced about him with sharpening perceptions. He found that he lay on the ground near the cabin. Near him were Paddy and Susan, also bound. The freighter had been moved to a spot midway between the aisles formed by the piled mounds of vulcanium ore. Paige could see the gleaming upper half of the craft over the top of the nearest of the parallel rows. Metallic, clanking sounds drifted to him, and he realized that Rudler and his brigands were using automatic loading machinery to stow the ore inside the freighter.

"Nice mess!" Paige muttered bitterly.

Susan's blue eyes were commiserating. "I know how you must feel."

"All those months o' work for nothin'!" Paddy mourned.

Paige listened dejectedly to the clanking noises of the loading machinery. He could visualize the scoop biting hungrily into the mounds, dropping load after load onto the moving conveyor belt, to be carried into the gaping maw of the freighter's hold. Bite after insatiable bite, quickly, ceaselessly. The ache in his head spread to his heart,

and each throb of the organ spread the ache further and further, to every cell of his being.

This time, it seemed, Strike was certain to have the last laugh.

Paige looked at his bindings. They were of spun glassite, slender and flexible, yet as strong and unbreakable as thongs of cured hide. He strained against them, more to verify his knowledge of their stoutness than in hopes of breaking them. He relaxed again, his muscles sagging in hopeless despair. He knew now why Rudler had not posted a guard over Susan, Paddy, and himself. The squat freebooter had known they would be unable to escape their glassite bonds.

Abruptly, Paige went rigid, and a gleam shot into his eyes. Glassite! Glassite was essentially glass, disregarding the modern methods of processing which gave a stronger product than was known by the world in earlier times. Glass meant silicon—and Sandy ate silicate compounds!

Paige recalled having last seen Sandy in the cabin. If the little sand-hog were still somewhere around—

"Sandy!" Paige called, softly and insistently. "Sandy! Come here, Sandy. Silicon!" He repeated it again and again.

After a dozen well-spaced repetitions, Paige was beginning to despair of the little sand-hog ever putting in an appearance. Then a flash of red and yellow caught his eye, and he jerked toward the spot in sudden hope. It was Sandy, edging curiously from behind a rock several yards away.

"Here, Sandy!" Paige cried. "Silicon!"

Sandy's amber eyes settled upon Paige and grew bright. Leaving the rock, he trotted forward eagerly.

Paige thrust out his bound hands. "Silicon!" he coaxed. "Here's silicon."

But to the little sand-hog silicon meant a handful of small rocks, and he saw nothing of the sort in evidence. He stared at Paige in bewilderment.

"Silicon!" Paige insisted, gesturing impatiently with his fettered hands.

SANDY was hungry enough to be hopeful. He couldn't see any silicon anywhere, but the Boss was obviously playing some kind of strange game. Entering impishly into the spirit of the occasion, Sandy romped forward to search Paige's pockets as he thought was required of him.

"No, darn it!" Paige gritted in desperation. "Here—*this* is silicon. Taste it, you little dope!"

Sandy licked obligingly at the glassite strands about Paige's thrusting wrists—then fell to with whole-hearted fervor. This was a new form of silicon to him, but he wasn't particular. The little sand-hog's tongue secreted some potent fluids, and while these didn't dissolve the glassite ropes entirely, they weakened them. Finally exerting pressure, Paige had his hands free.

Putting Sandy to work on Paddy's bonds, Paige worked loose the knots that held his legs, then feverishly began untying Susan. When he finished with the girl, he returned his attention to Paddy, and shortly all three were loose.

"Remain the way you were," Paige cautioned. "Rudler or one of his men may glance in our direction. Until we're ready to move, we've got to look as though we were still tied up."

Paige peered about him calculatingly. The pirates had loaded within the freighter the farthestmost of the two rows of ore, and were now started on the one which concealed Paige and the others from view. Some twenty yards away, still in its original position, was Susan's runabout. It lay just around the end of the remaining, nearer row,

and was thus visible to the pirates gathered before the mine at the opposite end.

Paige outlined his plans swiftly. "Paddy, you run to the cabin and get the rifle. Susan and I are going to try to reach the runabout. Once inside, I'll top them with the underjets, while you use the rifle to keep them from getting into the freighter. It's the only thing to do. We're the only persons who know that Rudler and a few of his men are alive, and he'll want to keep the advantage of surprise, when he gets back to raiding. That means he intends to quiet us when he finishes with the ore."

Paddy nodded and darted into the cabin. In a moment he came out with the rifle and made his way over to a mound of ore, from around the side of which he could cover the freighter's airlock.

Paige gestured to Susan, and together they bounded toward the runabout. As they turned the last mound of the remaining row of ore, the brigand called Frick sighted them. He released a shout of alarmed surprise. The others dropped whatever they were doing and reached frantically for their weapons.

Rudler took in the situation at a glance. He hellowed, "Into the freighter, you fools! They're going to top us!"

Lashed by Rudler's furious orders, the brigands started a concerted rush for the airlock of the freighter. Paddy, who had eagerly been waiting for that, opened up with the rifle.

Paige and Susan reached the runabout, tumbled inside. Quickly closing the airlock, Paige darted to the control room. Within seconds, he had the runabout in the air and moving toward the mine.

Paddy's covering fire with the electro-bolt rifle came to the pirates as something completely unexpected. Half

their number were dropped before the demoralized remainder recovered sufficiently to scatter for shelter. But even as they scattered, the runabout reached them, and the searing blast of the underjets flamed down into their midst. Susan, at what she knew to be happening below, covered her face with her hands.

WITHIN the space of a few heartbeats, it was over. Unsteadied by thought of the annihilation he had brought about, Paige landed and with an understandingly silent Susan, slowly left the ship.

Paddy hurried up, his leathery features split by a huge grin. "Them danged pirates sure got what was comin' to 'em!"

"Did . . . did we get all of them!" Paige asked shakenly.

"None of 'em got away from the freighter," Paddy said. "But you can count the cinders, if you want to."

"We'd better make sure, though," Paige advised. He turned to Susan. "Maybe you'd better wait for us in the cabin." The girl nodded, and with a gesture to Paddy, Paige strode toward the freighter.

The loading machinery was still in motion, the conveyor belt clanking, and the scoop swinging at the end of its boom. Paige bent over the control box nearby to bring the equipment to rest.

"Now it's your turn!" a familiar voice snarled.

Paige and Paddy whirled. Confronting them, a flame pistol gripped in his hand, was Cass Rudler! The wily free-booter had retained enough presence of mind not to run when Paddy's fire had caught him and his men at the airlock of the freighter. He had wedged himself under the hellying hull of the craft, and had thus escaped the destroying blast of the runabout's underjets. His

beard and heat-suit had been singed—but Rudler was alive.

Paige and Paddy were stupefied with shock. Rudler laughed harshly.

"Going to count cinders, eh? Well, this is one cinder you won't count. You two are going to help me finish loading the ore—and then you both are through!"

"I'll help!" Paige said quickly. "Don't shoot." As if in eagerness to placate the vengeful brigand, he bent quickly back to the control box. His hand reached for the lever that controlled the boom. In a flashing motion, he pulled the lever to one side. The boom curved around. The scoop swinging at its free end hurtled through the air, struck Rudler's shoulder a glancing blow. With a grunt of pain, the desperado staggered back. Instantly, Paige was upon him. The two struck the ground in a writhing tangle of arms and legs.

Rudler tried desperately to free his hand holding the flame pistol. Paige clung doggedly to the barrel of the weapon as they kicked and rolled over the ground. He got his free hand to Rudler's beard and yanked savagely. At that same time, he twisted violently at the hand holding the gun. The weapon flew through the air to land beyond reach.

In fury, Rudler pistoned his knee into Paige's stomach. Paige gasped in agony, and as he momentarily loosened his hold, the other pushed himself loose and rose. Shrilling bloodthirstily, Paddy attempted to join in the fray. Rudler swung a contemptuous arm, and Paddy went sprawling, losing all his enthusiasm.

Paige fought off nausea in time to dodge a vicious kick at his head. He caught Rudler's weighted boot and pulled. The pirate landed heavily on his back, and before he could rise, Paige

leaped upon him, driving in stinging blows to his face. With a sudden burst of maddened strength, Rudler heaved Paige off him and climbed to his feet, his bearded features a horrible mask of insane rage.

Paige rose at the same time. He blocked a furious swing at his head, sent a powerful jab to Rudler's stomach. Following his advantage swiftly, he closed in with a barrage of numbing punches. Then, while Rudler's guard was momentarily beaten down, Paige's right drove up from his hips in a flashing arc, every ounce of his weight solidly behind it. The blow caught Rudler squarely on the jaw. He swayed erect for an instant, features lax, eyes glassy, then dropped loosely to the ground.

"THERE you are!" Susan said, as she finished touching up with antiseptic the various cuts on Paige's face.

"Umm—thanks," Paige said, returning belatedly to the present. He almost wished his cuts had been more numerous. Susan made a very charming nurse.

Paige glanced outside through the open doorway of the cabin. He listened a moment to the industrious, clanking sounds of the loading machinery. The remaining row of piled ore was almost gone. A sullen Cass Rudler sat before the control box that operated the scoop, dropping load after load onto the moving conveyor belt. Seated comfortably a safe distance away, Paddy gripped the electro-bolt rifle and hawkishly watched the laboring brigand's every move. Occasionally, Paddy would bark a fierce order. No slave driver of ancient times had ever been more conscientious in the performance of his duties.

Susan said, "And now, about the contract, Mr. Paige . . ."

Paige became business-like. "Ah, yes, the contract. But before I sign, I

want you to tell me something."

"The name of the concern I'm representing?" Susan queried. "I'm sorry, Mr. Paige, but I couldn't do that."

"I already know the name of this mysterious concern. It's Solar Mining and Metals Company, Ogden Paige, chief tyrant. In other words, my father."

Susan gasped in surprise. "You . . . you guessed?"

Paige nodded. "No other mining firm but my father's could have had a reason for dealing with me anonymously. Strike obviously thought I'd refuse to do business with him because of that quarrel we had. But I've showed him up, and I don't see why things should be carried any further. What I want to know is, can I visit you in Placer City once in a while?"

"I'll be glad to give you an appointment at any time, Mr. Paige."

"I'm talking about pleasure, not business. And to you, Susan, the name's Gene."

Susan looked demure. "All right, Gene," she murmured. Abruptly she grinned. "It's a good thing you asked

me that. If you didn't, do you know what I was going to do? I was going to tear the contract into a million pieces and make you eat every one of them!"

A golden haze settled around Paige. He'd won through. He'd beaten Strike at his own game.

"You've got to start from the bottom and work your way up like I did—from pick and shovel to padded chair," Strike had said.

Paige had had a taste of the pick and shovel. He knew that the padded chair would now be his, if he cared to have it. And he intended to have it. Married men should lead quiet lives . . .

Suddenly there was a loud belch, and Sandy waddled into view through the open doorway. He didn't waddle very fast, for his swollen stomach was almost touching the ground. He sat down and belched again.

"Ouch!" he said complainingly.

"He's sick," Paige diagnosed. "The little rascal must have eaten those glass-site ropes all up."

"Wh-h-upp!" belched Sandy, in confirmation. "Ouch!"

THE END

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The Needle Points to DEATH

By GERALD VANCE

Jeff was about to lose both his life and his wife. Then a wavering needle pointed to an odd solution!

JEFF MORAN made several last-minute adjustments on the square apparatus which was in position on his lab bench. The equipment was constructed of gleaming metal and its four smooth sides were studded with rheostats and gauges. On top of the box-like device was a calibrated bar that recorded a measurement of temperature down to within a fractional decimal point of absolute zero. There was a barometric gauge above this, and a sensitive pressure indicator.

Jeff's lean face was anxious as he studied the equipment and made the last final checks. Everything was right. He'd know in a few more moments whether his months of research and work had achieved a practical result.

Twenty thousand miles above the tiny Venusian weather-base his partner, Bill Dexter, was circling slowly in a space ship, waiting for word from Jeff.

A door opened behind him and Jeff turned quickly. Ann, his wife, smiled at him as she came toward him.

"Kind of jumpy, aren't you, mister?"

"I guess so," Jeff said, feeling his nerves slowly relaxing again. He knew he was keyed up to an impossible tension—had been for the last few months. It hadn't been easy for Ann, he knew, but if things went well today, they could both forget the harrowing, nervous strain of those months.

"You're about ready for the final test, aren't you?" Ann asked.

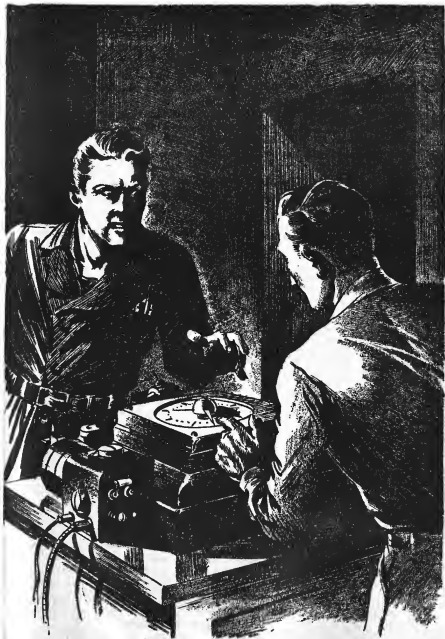
Jeff nodded. "Dexter's waiting for my signal right now. We'll know in a few minutes—one way or the other."

Ann put her hand on his arm. "Jeff, if things don't turn out the way we hope, it won't really matter to us. We'll just go on trying until it does."

Jeff patted her shoulder and smiled into her eyes. At moments like this he realized how lucky he was to have Ann at his side. She was a small girl, with a quick smile and short brown hair, and in her leather trousers and shirt she looked like a young boy.

"I think I've got it this time," he said, "but there's always a chance I overlooked something."

"I wish I understood more about



your work," Ann said. "Sometimes I feel that you'd like to talk to me about things, but can't because I'm such a ninny."

"That's nonsense," Jeff grinned. "You're the perfect listener and that's all any scientist wants. Anyway, this device isn't particularly complex. It's simply a means to determine the temperature in space at any given time. You know, of course, that the temperature in the void is always pretty close to absolute zero; but it would be a great help in rocket construction and navigation if we could know that temperature exactly, especially in areas like this where there is considerable variation. If my reasoning and work has been correct the Allied Research Council will have me on its staff inside of two weeks to superintend mass production of the *altoscope*. And that will be living again for you, honey. This drab hole is no place for a woman."

"I've never minded," Ann said.

"You'd say that anyway," Jeff said. "But you'll appreciate Earth a lot more after your two years here."

HE TURNED to the radio switch and contacted Dexter. In a minute his partner's brash, confident voice was in the room.

"All set, Jeff?"

"Yes. Let me check your position again."

"Twenty thousand miles on the head, northeast of the base by 21 degrees. Got it?"

"Okay. Now what's the temperature reading?"

There was a short silence and Jeff felt a film of perspiration beading his brow as he waited. Finally Dexter's voice came.

".005," he said. "Check?"

"Got it," Jeff said.

He wiped his hands after he made

a notation of the figures on a chart. Then he turned to the box-like device on the bench and slowly closed a switch. The lab seemed unnaturally still as the delicate registering needle began to flicker back and forth across the calibrated bar.

He could feel his heart beating loudly and rapidly and his hands were clenched tightly. Finally the swinging needle came to a stop and Jeff bent quickly down and read the number. He felt a sudden singing sensation in his ears.

"Ann!" he yelled. "Look!"

Ann's head was close to his as she bent down and he could see the happy, excited flush on her cheeks as she checked the number.

"Oh, Jeff," she said breathlessly, "how wonderful!"

The needle was pointing squarely at the numerals, .005. It was all over.

He signaled Dexter excitedly.

"Dex," he shouted, "it worked! Can you hear me?"

There was a short pause. Then: "Sure I can hear you. Congratulations. You'll be the big shot of Allied Research now for sure."

Jeff didn't miss the bitterness in his partner's voice. Bill Dexter was a good enough scientist, but he had a peculiar streak in him. He resented other people's good luck, and he had the idea that he had been shelved away in an unimportant spot because he lacked the right connections.

"I suppose," he went on, "you'll clear out of here fast enough now that your luck has turned."

"That won't be up to me," Jeff said. "Anyway the *altoscope* hasn't really been proven yet. I want to make quite a few more tests before I consider it right. Maybe this was just a fluke."

He felt annoyed at himself for practically apologizing to Dexter for his own success.

"I'm sure it's no fluke," Dexter said, after a moment. "You aren't the kind who makes mistakes. Great scientists never do. They leave them for suckers like me who haven't an uncle or brother on the Council."

HIS voice went off with a click. Jeff signaled him again, but the set was dead. He turned to find Ann regarding him with a worried little smile.

"Dexter sounded rather bitter," she said.

"I know. It's too bad he has to take it this way, but that isn't my fault."

Ann turned away and said quietly, "I'll be glad to get away from here for one reason."

"What's that?"

"Dexter."

"I thought you two got along all right," Jeff said with a puzzled frown. His face hardened swiftly and he put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him. "Did he ever give you any trouble?"

"Oh, nothing like that," Ann said. She shrugged and tried to smile. "May be I'm just being a silly woman, but he looks at me sometimes with that arrogant smile of his and I feel—oh, I don't know how to say what I mean."

"I know," Jeff said. "We'll be gone soon, but if he ever bothers you I'll break him over my knee."

"I shouldn't have said anything to you about it," Ann said. "You've got enough on your mind without worrying about your temperamental wife. Now go on with your work. I'll fix you some lunch."

Jeff was busy recording the results of the experiment when Dexter walked in. He was a big man with wide shoulders and wavy blond hair. His blue eyes were slightly mocking as he nodded to Jeff.

"Feel pretty good I imagine," he

said. "No more of this life for you."

"I feel good," Jeff said evenly, "but not because I may get a little more comfortable job through this work of mine. I'm thinking about the additional safety this device will bring to space navigation. If it saves one life it'll be well worth the time and labor I've spent on it."

"Hear, hear," Dexter said jeeringly. "Save that for the banquets when you get to Earth."

He sauntered over to the lab bench and studied the gleaming instrument with an odd look in his eye. His attention was centered on the red needle that indicated the temperature.

"I've got to hand it to you at that," he said finally. "It's a neat piece of work."

"Thanks," Jeff said dryly.

Dexter poked an inquisitive finger at the needle, but Jeff caught his wrist before he could touch it.

"What's the matter?" Dexter demanded. "Do you think I'm a saboteur?"

"No," Jeff said, "but that needle is charged with almost five thousand volts of electricity."

Dexter dropped his hand back to his side with an almost frightened gesture.

"Hell of a thing to leave exposed," he said.

"I had to," Jeff said patiently. "When it goes onto a space ship, naturally it will be insulated or covered with glass. But I've had so many checks and alterations to make that I didn't bother about it now."

"How do you work on it if it's charged?" Dexter asked.

"I use an insulated screwdriver to remove it," Jeff said.

He was silently wondering what was behind Dexter's questioning. Dexter had never displayed any interest in his work; in fact, he had been almost con-

temptuous of the labor Jeff had put into it. Now his sudden interest seemed suspicious.

"I see," Dexter said.

He yawned and glanced at his watch.

"I think I'll grab a nap," he said. "Where's Ann?"

"She's fixing lunch," Jeff said. He glanced up at Dexter and added, "Why?"

"Just wondering," Dexter said. He grinned at Jeff and sauntered out.

JEFF sat before the bench for several moments after he'd gone, a worried frown on his face. He knew Dexter's type pretty well, and it was a type he didn't care for. In his years here he had carefully avoided trouble with the man, but he felt now that Dexter had something on his mind. His questions about the *altoscope* might indicate just a normal curiosity, but . . .

Jeff shrugged and tried to concentrate on his work. The designs and specifications for the *altoscope* were locked securely in the vault and he was suddenly glad that he had taken that precaution.

He worked, then, until Ann came in to tell him lunch was ready.

Dexter didn't show up for lunch but when they were finishing he appeared in the doorway with a paper in his hand. He was grinning sardonically.

"Sorry to interrupt your little chat," he said, "but this flash just came through from Earth."

"What is it?" Ann asked.

"Seems a squadron of Martian ships are passing this way today. The Chief wants you to go up on reconnaissance, get their number and description."

"Where were they sighted from?" Jeff asked.

"The belt asteroid group saw them go by at 2369 on a Northwest course," Dexter said.

Jeff frowned and looked at his watch. He made a quick mental calculation. The Martian ships would be passing overhead in a few minutes.

"Are you sure of the time?" he asked Dexter.

Dexter reddened slightly.

"You can call back and check my figures, if you like," he said stiffly.

"I was just asking," Jeff said. "Did the chief ask for me particularly?"

"If you think I'm lying," Dexter said with sudden anger, "why don't you say so? I'm giving you the dope as I got it. The chief evidently doesn't trust me anymore for a routine assignment. Well, he can go to hell if he doesn't like my work. And that goes for you too."

"No one has said anything about your work," Jeff said quietly. "You're doing all the talking, Dexter." He stood up and tossed his napkin onto the table. "Is the ship ready?"

"Yes," Dexter said. "She's all set."

"I'll have to hurry, then," Dexter said. He bent quickly and kissed Ann. "I'll be back in an hour or so."

When he straightened he saw that Dexter was staring at him with hard cold eyes; but he turned and walked from the room before Jeff could say anything to him.

Ann said, "Do you have to go, Jeff? I've got a funny feeling—call it a woman's intuition—that something might happen to you. Why don't you tell Dexter to go?"

"Because it's my job," Dexter said. He smiled down at his wife. "And I wouldn't worry about your premonitions. As the wife of a scientist, you should be ashamed of such ideas."

"I don't care," Ann said. "My hunches have a way of turning out right."

Jeff kissed her again and mussed her hair with his hand.

"I'll be back before you know it," he said.

OUTSIDE, the mechanic had readied the single-seater for an immediate blast-off.

"She's ready to go, Mr. Moran," he said, smiling.

"Thanks," Jeff said.

He ascended the mooring tower and climbed into the small sleek ship. He checked the controls carefully but quickly and then signaled to the ground for power.

The noise of the compressing motors hummed in his ears for an instant and the ship was hurled from the tower with a hissing roar.

Jeff braced himself as the ship cleaved through the thin atmosphere and blasted out into the void. He climbed quickly, gaining altitude and then he started a slow wide circle, watching the fore and rear visi-screens for the first sight of Martian ships.

They should be coming into sight any second. He wondered fleetingly if there was any significance behind their flight. Relations between Earth and Mars were ostensibly cordial, but any unusual operations in the void were carefully checked by both Powers.

Maybe things were heading for a flare-up. Jeff had a certain satisfaction in the thought that if trouble did break his *altoscope* would be an important addition to the fighting forces of Earth.

He sat up in his seat as a single ship appeared in fore screen but it turned out to be a lumbering Venusian freighter. It passed him on his port side, a couple of thousand miles away. He acknowledged its signal automatically and then settled back to wait. But his face was creased with a worried frown. Was it possible that he had missed the Martian ships?

They were overdue by now and still the void was completely empty. Finally, after another ten minutes, he signaled the asteroid belt. It took him another five minutes to get in touch with their operator.

"Hello," he said, when he got a go-ahead, "this is Jeff Moran from Venus, station 9. Am I coming through?"

"Getting you fine, but a little interference," the operator said. "Where the hell are you?"

"About twenty thousand miles out," Jeff answered.

"Well, no wonder!" The operator's voice in his ears sounded surprised. "What can I do for you?"

"I want a check on the time you sighted the Martian flight," Jeff said.

There was a pause and then the operator said, "You're on a wild goose chase, Moran. We haven't sighted any Martian squadrons for the last three weeks."

"What!" Jeff exclaimed. His frown deepened. "Are you sure of that? We got a report from the chief that a Martian flight passed your base heading this way at 2369."

"Something's screwy, then," the operator said. "I've been on here all day and I haven't heard a word about it. Why don't you check with the chief?"

"Okay, I will," Jeff said.

HE CUT the circuit and signaled Headquarters. Colonel Walker, chief of the meteorology staff on Venus, answered.

Jeff wasted no time.

"Colonel," he snapped, "did you send a message to base 9 about a half hour ago concerning a group of Martian ships?"

"Who's talking?" Colonel Walker asked irritably.

"This is Moran, Jeff Moran, of 9."

"Oh. No, I sent no message to you today. What was that about Martian ships?"

Jeff didn't bother to answer. He broke the connection and sat motionless for an instant, his brain spinning frantically. Dexter had lied to him. But why?

There was only one answer and it sent a wave of fear through him.

Not for himself. For Ann.

If Dexter was planning to get him out of the way it could only be for one reason. He intended to make his own escape in the emergency ship at the base. And Jeff knew that Dexter wasn't planning to leave alone.

With all the strength in his arms he swung the ship back toward the base in a steep dive. But suddenly he felt a heavy constriction about his lungs, and then he was fighting desperately for breath.

He glanced at the oxygen meter and saw that its needle was pointing squarely at zero.

He was still minutes from the base and his air supply was gone. Already he could feel his legs growing numb and before his eyes there was a flickering maze of blackness.

Recklessly he plunged the ship toward the base. He was off the directional beam that would lead him to the tower, but he didn't have the time to reset his course.

He knew that he had, at best, about a minute left. And he had to get to the ground within that time. His legs ached with a dull steady pain and his hands on the controls were sluggish. His mouth opened and closed frantically as he fought for air.

Dimly he heard the whine of friction the ship made as it sliced into the atmosphere of the planet. He was flashing down at full speed for a head-on crash.

With his last atom of strength he groped for the repulsion rocket switch. The ground raced toward him on the fore visi-screen at a speed his eyes couldn't register.

He snapped the switch shut and his head snapped forward as the repulsion rockets suddenly roared into life, checking the hurtling speed of the ship. His safety belt almost cut through his body as he was flung forward with the tremendous velocity of the ship.

Twenty feet from the ground the ship came to a dead stop—then it dropped to the hard rocky earth with a jarring crash.

Jeff unbuckled his safety strap and staggered to the door. For a moment he feared the buckling of the frame had hopelessly jammed the hatch, trapping him in the ship. But it was only his own weakness. His fingers clawed desperately at the handle and finally it swung open.

A reviving draft of air blew into his face as he stumbled out of the ship. He sucked air gratefully into his laboring lungs and his head began to clear.

He was about a hundred yards from the base laboratory. With a prayer on his lips he began to run. . . .

THE front door of the small building was open and the living room was empty. He crossed the floor with rapid strides and flung open the laboratory door.

Ann was struggling in Dexter's arms, her face a mask of loathing and terror. She saw Jeff as he stumbled into the room.

"Jeff!" she cried.

Dexter's back was to Jeff, but he wheeled at Ann's cry and whipped a ray gun from his belt. He was wearing a rubber space suit and there was a heavy valise on the floor beside him.

"Don't move!" he panted, glaring at

Jeff. "You got back here but it won't do you any good. I'm leaving here, you understand? And I'm taking your wife and the plans for the *altoscope* with me. But you're not coming! You're going to stay right here with a dozen holes in your body to keep you company."

Jeff watched him as he spoke and he saw the insanity in the man's eyes. Dexter was not bluffing. He meant just what he said.

"You thought you were so smart," Dexter said with a gloating leer, "but I'm holding the high cards now. You should have died out there in space and saved me the trouble of shooting you."

"You've gone to a lot of trouble to kill me," Jeff said quietly. "If I hadn't called and checked on your phony story about the Martian ships, I wouldn't have had time to get back here to the base." He glanced casually about the laboratory and then walked deliberately to the bench that held the *altoscope*. Every foot of the way he expected a searing bolt from the gun in Dexter's hand, but it didn't come.

"Don't make another move," Dexter cried, his face working. "I'm not just talking."

"Yes you are," Jeff said coolly. "If you're going to shoot me, go ahead."

A wild, thousand-to-one possibility had occurred to him, but he had to stall long enough to put it into action.

"I intend to go on working," he said with his back to Dexter. "If you want to shoot me that's your business."

He pulled a pair of rubber gloves onto his hands and picked up a long coil of wire from the bench. Quickly he fastened the wire to the *altoscope* needle and then picked up a screwdriver.

"I don't know whether you intend to shoot me or not," he said quietly. His back hid the screwdriver from Dexter's eyes as he quickly tied the wire to its steel tip. "But if you're going to I wish

you'd get it over with."

"Turn around!" Dexter snarled. "I want to see your face when I blow a hole in your belly."

"Jeff!" Ann screamed. "He's going to shoot!"

"Then let him," Jeff said.

He turned slowly, holding the screwdriver in his hand. Dexter was standing about four feet from Ann, his finger tightening on the trigger of the gun.

"All right," Dexter suddenly screamed, "you're begging for it!"

HE RAISED the gun slightly and at that instant Jeff flung himself to one side and hurled the screwdriver at Dexter's face.

The blast from the gun caught Jeff in the shoulder and he fell to the floor, teeth clenched in pain; but the screwdriver struck Dexter in the face.

A blinding flash lighted the room and Dexter's scream was that of a soul in hell. His eyes were glazed in death as he sprawled to the floor.

Jeff crawled to one knee and stared at his limp body with grim eyes. The screwdriver he had thrown had been connected to the electrically charged *altoscope* needle with the coils of wire. It had been charged with over five thousand volts of electricity and Dexter's space suit had grounded him perfectly.

Ann was at Jeff's side, sobbing.

He put his good arm about her.

"It's all over," he whispered. "He got just what he deserved, don't worry."

"I'm not thinking of him," Ann said tearfully. "But you're hurt."

"I'll be all right," Jeff said.

He forced a weak grin to his lips.

"And I've got a hunch we'll be on our way back to Earth before many more hours."

Ann smiled at him through her tears. "But you don't believe in hunches."

"From now on I will," Jeff said.

(Cont. from page 30)

Bandro took three quick steps toward him, nostrils flaring. "Fool!" he sneered. "You will be caught in her toils like numberless others. Know you not that she is not what she seems?"

"Know you not that it isn't any of your business whether I do or don't know?—and quit talking behind a lady's back!"

They glared at each other.

Bill said, levelly, harshly. "Let's you and me get off on the right foot. Bandro. I don't like you. I never will like you. Get it?"

Bandro was voiceless. His gray skin grew dark. He at last said in a strangled voice,

"We will remember that, friend Bill!"

He turned, was gone, and Bill wrinkled his nose and said, "Nuts!"

Within less than a minute, he was attacking his typewriter in a very frenzy of creation.

He was halfway through his story when Bess-Istra entered the room. Bill ripped a sheet from his typewriter in a daze. He rose awkwardly, face flushed.

"Forgive me, my friend Bill," she said smoothly; "but I have gone to the trouble to make your story credible to the outside world. Are you yet finished with it?"

"A half-hour yet," Bill said dazedly. Then his eyes sharpened. He said slowly, "Yes . . . yes, of course, I will have trouble making my editor believe. But how have you—?"

"Finish your story," she cried. There was a warm, almost childish delight in her voice. "And then I will show you!"

Bill finished his story, but curiosity was rife in him. He read over the typewritten pages, and a huge grin of satisfaction spread over his face, which was beginning to acquire a reddish growth of beard.

"Boy!" He whispered to himself, lov-

ingly stuffing the manuscript into one of the legal-size envelopes he kept with his typewriter. "Hot stuff!"

He looked up at Bess-Istra, wandering through the gleaming, instrument-studded interior of the great ship. She led him to an alcove where Stevens, Bandro, and Sab-Hallo were standing. Nearby, next to a slanting board with red buttons, a metal-braid clad soldier stood. Bess-Istra motioned to him.

He pressed a stud—and the entire side of the alcove fell away, letting in the daylight of the outside world; and as the gang-plank touched and was still, Bill cried out in unbelief.

The ship had landed on the roof of the New York Corey Features Syndicate Building!

BILL knew that was so because, two blocks away was the Empire State Building. Bill had often seen that gigantic structure from this roof.

But mostly he knew it because a half-hundred of the employees of the New York Corey Features Syndicate had surrounded the ship, yelling and running, and waving their hands excitedly.

Stevens' eyes were bulging. "New York City!" he gasped. He almost looked frightened. He had never seen any city bigger than Mozambique or Lorenzo Marques.

"By—the unholy—hinges of—Hell!" Bill said, spacing the syllables out. "What the—" But he got the idea. Nobody could fail to believe this story now—particularly with his editor standing in the forefront of the crowd over there, jaw hanging slack.

Bill burst into an excited roar.

"Mac!" he yelled. "Mac!"

He raced from the gangplank onto the roof; he grabbed the dazed man's hand, shouting senseless things. Then he thrust the manuscript into his hand.

"Print this! Spread it over the front

page of every newspaper that wants to pay a fancy price for a first-hand account of the saving of the world! I'll get you a story a day from now on, until it's over over there. And my percentage jumps from 60% to 80%! Okay?"

"Okay!" gasped the startled editor. "But—but what—that is—Bill—" He floundered.

"Save it!" he laughed joyously. "You'll get the whole story from that manuscript. Goo'bye!"

He turned, sped into the interior of the ship, and the gangplank soughed into place behind him. And a few seconds later, the ship from the stars hurled into the air toward "the soft belly" of the Axis dragon"—toward Italy!

For, Bill had decided, there lay the next logical striking point against the monstrous forces that were throttling the world!

CHAPTER VI

Victory on the Second Front

BESS-ISTRA stood close to Bill. He could feel her bare arm on his as they looked into the view-plate. He wondered if she were doing it intentionally. It was doing things to his insides.

"There's Italy!" he exclaimed. "The real European Second Front. It was preceded by the battle for Tunisia. When the Allies won that, they had the whole coast of North Africa for a jumping-off place to attack Hitler; for North Africa was, in effect, an airplane carrier . . . a *big* one!"

Bandro stroked at his sharp-pointed chin. The ship was dropping slowly downward and forward, following the low mountain range that girds the west coast of the Roman boot.

"And the war strategy of the Allies—

of your inadequately armed American forces?"

"They may have been inadequately armed from the standpoint of what you think is adequate," Bill retorted, disliking the insolence which Bandro at times deliberately put into his tones, "but from our standpoint we had the goods! *Had* it! But now the Americans and the English, three hundred thousand of them, are about to enter another Dunkirk!"

His face was pale with agony as he said it. He hadn't realized until he had listened to a newscast which Bess-Istra had picked up for him that the Allies were facing such a black future in Europe. Now they were dying like flies.

"As for their strategy, they hammered Italy from Africa with hundreds of big bombers, destroying port after port. But the Italian navy, commanded and manned by Germans, escaped and is loose in the Mediterranean. That navy played hell when we ferried men across the sea from Tunis to Italy. But the British navy chased them, and halfway up the coast of Italy, where the mountain range breaks, we landed our armies. For awhile it seemed like things were going good, but Hitler meanwhile was bringing in reinforcements from the Russian front and the Vichy French forces were drafted, too.

"The Allies, in the first week of fighting, completely drove across the middle of Italy to the Ionian Sea, cutting off all communications in the boot part of Italy. But in the next three months the Nazis proved too much for them. As things stand now the hard-fought for position in Italy will be entirely lost."

"The inhumanity of man to man," said Stevens hopelessly. "And after the war, what plan of action will keep

down the beast in man—keep it down forever?"

Sab-Hallo laughed a high-pitched laugh and rubbed his hands together. His eyes were gloating. "We shall solve that problem, too," he said throatily. "There are few problems that my genius cannot solve. "For instance, I have a—"

"Quiet!" Bess-Istra snapped. "Your genius will earn you an early death if you do not remember that I command you in all things."

"Very well, my lady," the squat, broad-shouldered scientist said sullenly. But Bill, watching him, saw a grim look pass between him and the perpetually sneering Bandro.

BESS-ISTRA gripped Bill's arm. Bill found himself looking deep into her barbaric eyes. And he knew they were barbaric. He knew that she was wilful, strong of mind, ready to temper, thoroughly spoiled — dangerous, maybe. And yet his attraction for her, deadly though it was, was growing, no matter how hard he fought it. And he knew that she knew it—for now there as a taunting mockery in the impertinent curl of her full red lips.

"And now," she breathed, "if we render the enemy army helpless, if we entirely destroy resistance, the Allies will be able to gain control of all Italy, will be able to depose this large-jawed man called Mussolini."

"And not only that," Bill said vibrantly, "but our armies will be ready to pour into Germany! For Hitler will simply be unprepared for this blow. He won't be able to muster his forces."

"So be it," she spoke coolly, and turned to Sab-Hallo. "When the mountains break, turn eastward until we come to the front where these gallant, Allies are dying. We shall destroy all resistance with the gas-ray!"

The ship hurled into a sudden speed and the sky without, arching over the post-card-pretty Mediterranean, blurred. And when the ship stopped, they were looking down at the battle—a battle that made Bill's blood run cold! He knew that never before had man seen such horror. Never had so many and such murderous weapons of artillery been gathered in one place; nor so many tanks; nor, if it were known, had men fought with such ferocity.

Although in this part of the world it was early afternoon, the only light was that furnished by frantic search-beams stabbing the sky for dive-planes; by cannon — mostly 155-mm. howitzers, Bill guessed, supported by 75s and 100s—which belched fire that was purplish-red like the blood of reptiles; by tracer-bullets leaping across devastated open spaces from hidden pill-boxes where machine-guns chattered.

No light, except from these weapons! For a black pall of smoke lingered from horizon to horizon.

But in that light, Bill saw great tanks spitting out their death at retreating Allied soldiers. Saw heaps of bodies blooding that never-to-be-forgotten battle-field.

And then, as the ship from the stars hovered, he saw field artillery turned upward!

Bill was aghast. "Those damned Nazis are firing at us!" he cried wildly. "They'll bring us down before we can accomplish our purpose!"

And indeed, little puffs of light were exploding about and near the ship.

"No!" Stevens was pale. He stammered, without conviction, "No! The Lord is just. Though we walk in the valley of the shadow of death, he will not permit us to die when our mission is so great!"

"That God Whom you call the Lord,"

said Bess-Istra, and Bill for the life of him could not tell whether she was being serious or faintly sarcastic, "must indeed be powerful. For this ship is impervious to ordinary missiles such as those. Indeed, only the green ray of death and disintegration could harm it. Still," she added, apparently in deepest thought, "it does not seem probable that your God the Lord would have had the foresight to have created this ship solely for the purpose of defeating your enemies."

The Reverend John Stevens said seriously, solemnly, "But it may well be the case, Mistress Bess. He works in strange ways his wonders to perform."

There was an ironic, retrospective smile to her lips, and her eyes were lidded, as if they were gazing backward along the trail of memory. "Strange," she muttered, and her voice was curiously metallic. "A strange god indeed that does not bid its worshippers to strive arrogantly and impetuously, cruelly, for power. In my province, where I was born, there was a god who— But stay! This is foolishness. Sab-Hallo, on this Axis army which seems likely to defeat our friends the Allies, you will use the gas-ray! And use it until all their legions have fallen in stupid slumber, easy prey for the embattled Tommies and Yanks!"

THE gas-ray! In the next two hours, the two natives of the embattled planet Earth saw that alien weapon used with awful effect. Sab-Hallo touched a stud on the edge of the instrument panel. And Bill saw a soft, yellow-spangled cone of light flick downward toward that anti-aircraft battery which was pouring a solid stream of projectiles toward the hovering space-ship.

Almost immediately, the very air within a hundred feet glittered with in-

ternal atomic-explosions. Little motes danced prismatically, beautifully, and seemed to be sucked toward the humans—toward the Nazis who operated the gun. Swept toward them, was helplessly breathed in by them.

And they—*fell!* Fell on the ground by the tens. And then by the hundreds, as the beam flicked toward other firing units, and still others.

And an hour passed. Bill didn't know how the Americans and British felt, but he could guess. For all along that fifty-mile battle-line, a strange cylindrical ship was moving, and a mighty army, certain of victory, was being plunged into the maddest kind of panic.

The very air surrounding every enemy unit, every tank and fox-hole and pill-box, was turned to a deadly gas which dropped men like flies!

And the Allies, grim men in olive drab, were rushing in to consolidate those miraculously harmless positions. It was probable that they had by this time seen the ship from space, and knew it was responsible. It was also probable, that by this time, the news concerning the ship from space had already been printed in innumerable newspapers, and by this time was being broadcast over the radio. But Bill was too fascinated to pick up such a broadcast from Bess-Istra's tele-radio.

At the end of the second hour, Bill was weak and limp from excitement. "Thank God for small favors, Johnny," he whispered. "It's done! Can you imagine it? The biggest German army ever assembled in one spot—and it's out of commission!"

"I have already thanked God," the young missionary stated. "Nor do I think, Bill, that it was a small favor. What we have seen is the real beginning of the end. We can win no greater victory—for this is victory! Peace will soon come to the planet Earth!"

CHAPTER VII

The Capture of Adolph Hitler

AND—never in the history of the world was a war ended so quickly and so bloodlessly!

MUSSOLINI FLEES ROME!

Aboard The Ship From The Stars, July 19—(CF)—Today an era ends. A Fascist tyrant who became the military tool of the most hated man in the world is in disorganized retreat from the seat of his hoped-for empire.

This morning I saw the complete conquest of the German army stemming the advance of Allied troops into Italy. That news has already been flashed to the world: how the gas-ray, the utterly strange weapon of another world, rendered the Nazi forces helpless; how the Allies, suffering from almost certain defeat, swept toward Rome on the tide of certain victory; and by late tomorrow, I assure you, will have spread their rule over all of Italy.

But at noon today, through the mysterious TELE-ray of Bess-Istra, I searched out Mussolini himself, saw him sitting in session extraordinary with his ministers. The session ended with a nerve-wracked man's complete nervous collapse. His ministers were little better off. I followed them as they ran from the chamber, took a private car for the airfield, where they board a transport plane.

They are in that plane now—bound for Germany, like dogs running home to their master!

"And where shall we attack next, O Bill?" inquired Bess-Istra. The faint insolence on her lips lingered as a taunting reminder to Bill that he was playing with dynamite merely by standing so close to her.

As the planet Earth might be playing with dynamite by accepting her favor?

He broke off the momentary thought with a deep shudder that shook his very soul.

In answer to her question, he spoke again, gutturally: "To the Russian front!"

And to the Russian front went the ship from the stars. Went there—and left again within an hour and a half. And behind it was a German army of soldiers whose eyes were suddenly blank with lost memories.

Guns dropped from their hands.

They wandered aimlessly on the blood-drenched ground south of the River Don.

Half-track tractors hauling 155-mm. howitzers, captured from the Russians earlier in the war, continued to move—but their bearded, unutterably bedraggled drivers gazed stupidly at the controls until the engines of war crashed into a tree or rolled down into a culvert and turned over.

Tanks kept on going, witlessly, until they turned over, pawing at the air with their madly clanking caterpillar treads.

Artillery ceased to fire when gunner crews sat down on the ground and picked preoccupiedly at their nails.

Transports crossing the Baltic loaded with men stopped after awhile and drifted, for the black gang no longer remembered such things as coal and engines and boilers; and the captains on the bridge merely stood and looked dumbly at the bluish fog that rolls on the Baltic swells. . . .

And later, along the German-fortified west coast of Europe, men also turned dumb as from the ship of Bess-Istra came a high-frequency vibration that short-circuited mental synapses; or were stricken into unknowing slumber as the gas-ray got in its work.

From the north the Russians came.

From the south, the American and British Allied forces. And from the west, Great Britain launched an invasion of France and Norway; and met no resistance.

Three armies swept toward Berlin as internal revolution broke. . . .

The day of Adolph Hitler was over. And the day of Hirohito!

"**A**SIA offers no greater problem," spoke Bill van Astor-Smythe grimly. "Japan has bitten off more than she can chew in China. China is not conquered—hardly occupied. Oh, the cities and villages and hamlets have been taken along the coast, and far inland. Chungking has fallen. *But*—holding a city doesn't mean that you hold the land surrounding that city! There are the guerrilla fighters who rule the open spaces between the cities, who harass Japanese troop movements and communication lines and have given the Japs quaking nerves. All we have to do is to render the Japanese of those cities powerless so that the native citizens and the guerrillas can overthrow them. *But*—well, but how?"

Bess-Istra drew her dark brows frowningly down toward her gold-flecked eyes. "Well?" she demanded. "Sam-Hallo—how?"

The squat scientist's wide-set eyes held hers with a studied impatience. He said acidly, "There is no problem, if we but sweep such cities with psychotic waves that will set Japs and Chinese against each other, and provide ample advantage for the guerrillas to enter and take command."

She took a step toward him, her hand falling to the gun at her hip. She said tonelessly, "This war will be ended so that we do not kill either friend or enemy, Sab-Hallo!"

"*Friends!*" the scientist cried, sweep-

ing the Reverend John Stevens and Bill van Astor-Smythe with a scathing look. "They are not your—"

"Cease, Sab-Hallo!"

The command did not come from Bess-Istra, but from Bandro. The tall man's eyes were flashing with anger. He thundered at Sab-Hallo, "It is not your place to question our mistress! She is right, of course. We shall bring peace to this planet—peacefully!"

The fire died from Sab-Hallo's broad face. There was a moment of silence while his eyes searched Bandro's. And Bill could have sworn that something flickered between them, some understanding. What?

Sab-Hallo's shoulders fell in resignation. "Very well, Mistress Bess," he said smoothly. "I have a weapon which will vanquish these Japs so that the guerrillas can come in without chance of harm. The fire-ring!"

By the end of that day, Bill had another story to write.

From the belly of the ship, as it hovered over a village, a swiftly expanding fire-ring was hurled; much as a smoke-ring is puffed from the throat. This fire-ring grew, both in size and in brilliance—and it dropped over the Jap-controlled village as a cowboy would drop a noose over a running horse's head!

And like the noose of a riata, the fire-ring began to contract.

It contracted slowly. Bill saw shopkeepers come bursting from their doors in mad excitement as the ring rolled along the ground toward them; saw Japs, darting through the streets, Japs who knew that this was another strange weapon released from that ship which had paralyzed their allies in Europe.

There was panic in that village. The ring swept through solid structures without harm, rolled on its way unimpaired. Neither Chinese nor Japs

dared to get near that ring, nor to hurdle it. Consequently, they were all huddled in the center of the city in a tight knot, unable to flee anywhere.

The ring came on; some Chinese leaped in it—without harm! But before others could follow their example, the fiery ring contracted to its center, rolling through the huddled people—and winked out.

Apparently nothing had happened.

BUT something had. For suddenly the vastly more numerous townspeople attacked the Japs, probably feeling that since this was a weapon, it had been used for their benefit. And they were right. For as the Jap soldiers attempted to fight back, their guns did not fire!

The ring of fire's only function—but a powerful one—was to eat up and to entirely dissipate a chemical without which gunpowder is *not* gun-powder; the ring had simply destroyed all the sulphur in that village!

By the end of that day, fire-rings had been looped over Shanghai, Hong-Kong—and Singapore. . . .

Outnumbered Japs were swarmed over, made prisoner, and a liberated Asia started to go mad with joy. And in Tokyo, when a shining, cylindrical ship floated with the nonchalance of complete confidence over that city, high officials realized that the game had run its course. The members of that diabolical society known as the "black dragon" committed hara-kiri down to the last man.

In Australia, Japanese morale was broken, and the army which had gained a foothold on the north coast retreated with dreadful losses, and that same day was utterly destroyed when the transports on which they sought to make their escape were sunk by American B-24's.

In Java, the natives rose in one savage wave of revolt and swept over their hated conquerors. The French East Indies again raised the French flag.

Bill directed Bess-Istra in this supreme undertaking that enveloped the whole world, and literally knocked from under them the legs of the would-be totalitarian conquerors of the world. And now, as a crashing finale, he made his last suggestion, which Bess-Istra indulgently acted upon.

In Tokyo, an utterly black beam speared down from the belly of the ship, plunged through the roof of a building decorated with hideous gargoyles, sought its way down through level after level, and touched a man cowering against the wall; swallowed him up, so that there was no trace of him.

The beam snapped to another corner of the city, sought out another toothsome, wrinkled yellow man; similarly swallowed him.

The ship snapped halfway around the world in the small part of a minute. Down the black beam dipped; again, again, and again! Plunged into the very heart of the council chamber where sat a fat, cruel man, and a slim man, and a man with a large jaw, and a man with a lock of hair hanging down over his ghastly pale forehead. And others, of lesser import. These the beam swallowed.

And in a chamber in the ship, after they had been materialized there, after they had been drawn like formless gases upward through walls by the black beam, were more than a dozen men.

All important leaders of the Axis combine were prisoners of Bess-Istra!

CHAPTER VIII

Mistress of Earth

IN SPITE of the fact that Bill had been in on the ground floor of a real

miracle from heaven, he was stunned. So much had happened in the last few days that it was beyond the imagination to comprehend.

The war was over!

"The war is over," Bill repeated blankly. "Johnny! Did you hear me, boy?"

"Eh? Eh? Oh, yes!"

Bill's typewriter played a slow, stuttering tune, and then went like mad.

"The folks at home don't have to feel like fifth-columnists if they drink more than one and two-tenths cups of coffee! Boy! They don't have to steal extra lumps of sugar from restaurants. Huzzah! There ain't any more of Tirtitz' subs snaking along through the seas. They gave up the fight yesterday when they heard about Hitler. Poor, poor Hitler! Come here, Hitler—giffs candy und ice cream. Come here—and I'll smash your face in. But you ought to be glad *we've* got you. You ought to be glad you ain't in Berlin, what with the Tommies swarming all over the place. Hmm. Same goes for Tojo and his thugs. Too bad about Laval and Quisling. They couldn't take it—Johnny, I heard that over the *tele-radio*. Laval and Quisling picked out some real high buildings and jumped; *squer-rooch!*" Bill laughed a little bit insanely. He picked at his nails with his teeth, staring at the typewriter as he tried to finish a story that would be radioed to his syndicate by Bess-Istra's equipment.

He didn't hear any answering laugh from Stevens, though.

He turned around. His jaw fell. "Johnny!"

"I think I can do it," Stevens whispered. His chest rose and fell. He panted, "I *know* I can!"

He jumped up and wildly paced the length of the room. His eyes were wide and staring, his lips were working over

each other in a highly nervous exaltation. Bill gulped, shook his head, blinked.

"Hold it! What gives?"

"I can do it," Stevens whispered.

"Do what?"

"I can convert Bess-Istra!"

"Convert—" Bill yelled the word out, and then sank back, feeling as if the world were coming to an end. He leaned forward and bared his teeth:

"*Why?* Why in the name of God do you want to convert her? She's got her own religion. She's got her own system of theogony. She wouldn't want to be converted!"

"Oh, yes, she would!" Stevens whirled. "And why would I wish to convert anybody except in the name of God? We have been commanded to go to all corners of the Earth and preach the gospel—"

"This isn't a corner of the Earth! It's a God-forgotten piece of a planet which existed so many years ago you can't think it."

"Nothing is God-forgotten. Particularly Bess-Istra. She proves it by listening to me. By asking me about the Lord. She never tires. Bill—Bill—" Stevens' voice suddenly stopped; a stricken look appeared in his eyes. His lips shook and he bit at them. He sank down on the three-legged chair, hands between his knees. "Bill," he whispered. "Bill—*she is so unutterably lovely!*"

BILL started to say something, and the words jammed in his throat. He jumped to his feet, holding his head in his hands, taking three long strides to the other end of the featureless room, then whirling and confronting Stevens with pity in his eyes.

"You poor hopeless idiot. You're in love with her!"

Stevens looked up and there was

nothing but a blurred pain in his ingenuous blue eyes.

"I am," he choked miserably. "I am!"

"You fool! She's been leading you on. She's no more interested in your creed than that sneaking Bandro and Sab-Hallo. She likes the idea of twisting you around her little finger. She likes to pull guns on people. She likes to kick them around. There's nothing good and true in a carload of her. Convert her? Don't make me laugh. Johnny—" He paused in pained, hopeless exasperation; and then whirled as he heard a voice behind him.

"It is interesting to know in what light you regard me, O Bill!"

Bill started to speak; then clamped his lips. "You heard me," he said brutally, his glance hard on Bess-Istra.

There was cold fire in her eyes. Her skin was white as marble, and her voice bit like shattered glass shards.

"I will remember that, Bill!" she grated. "I will remember that though I have freed your planet from a terrible bondage, you feel no gratitude. You feel that I have an ulterior motive instead."

A hard, accusing little smile wrinkled the corners of Bill's mouth. "I've been playing my cards as I got them, Bess-Istra. Playing them for all they were worth. And letting the finesse take care of itself. Unfortunately, I can't finesse. I've been having fun up to this point—but after this— Well; Bess-Istra—" his voice ground out the words "*—just what is your motive?*"

"You've freed the world, you've stopped a big war, you've got the trouble-makers locked up tight. Fine. Swell. That's what you promised to do. But how come you came to this planet in a ship loaded to the gunwales with the instruments of war? How come you left your own planet at all?

Who are you? What comes after this? Don't hand me that line about us being your friends. You've been playing a little game and having a lot of fun—like giving candy to children. Only maybe the candy will give us a tummy-ache!"

Stevens' hand bit into Bill's arm. But all he could do was to shake his head miserably.

The color had entirely left Bess-Istra's face. Every muscle in her body was visibly tensed. Her shoulders literally shook when she spoke; and her voice jangled horribly.

"You will regret that, Bill. You will understand how you have misjudged Bess-Istra—some day! Know then, that in a few minutes from the control room of this ship I shall broadcast a message to the peoples of Earth, a message which will clear everything else from the air, a message which will sound from every open receiver in the world!"

"The peoples of Earth shall soon know my intentions with regard to them—and so shall you."

TWO of Bess-Istra's mechanics fiddled in the interior of the tele-radio which filled one side of the control room. Monstrous *blurrup*-ings came from the machine. Bill knew that the ether waves of Earth were being cleared, every station in the world literally scoured off the air by a controlled-static.

Then the transmitter was ready!

Bill stood silently, his heart a stone in his breast. What would Bess-Istra say? Would she prove herself to be what Bill thought her—or what he wanted her to be?

Bess-Istra stepped in front of the grating that would receive her voice.

Her glance passed over Randro, in whose mottled dark eyes Bill saw a hard, watchful eagerness; and then to

Sab-Hallo, who stood with arms crossed on his barrel-chest, face expressionless, yet sardonic.

Lastly, Bess-Istra looked at Bill. At the icy rage in her glance, Bill flinched; but his jaw came out, and he managed to show some of his bitter cynicism in his own eyes. Slowly her lips tensed, and with a pantherine motion she twisted savagely to face the "mike." She made a motion to a nondescript man, her announcer:

"Peoples of Earth, listen! Peoples of Earth, Bess-Istra, your benefactor, shall speak to you—*now!*" The man's deep voice rolled out over the world; then he stepped aside, and Bess-Istra spoke:

"I am Bess-Istra! Know my voice, now, peoples of Earth; for you shall hear it often. I came from the stars, and found a planet in thrall, wrapped in the toils of a monstrous war, cruelly beset by creatures whom you call Nazis and Japs; creatures whom I believe to be scarcely human. Seeing this, I at once set about freeing you!

"And now you are free!

"Already, by listening to the many broadcasts which fill the air-waves, I can sense the mad, hysterical joy which has taken possession of you. The war is over! The enemy is humbled, and everywhere Allied soldiers—the gallant Tommies and Yanks and Aussies and Canadians and Filipinos and Senegalese and Fighting French and innumerable others—have flowed into the conquered areas. The morale of a bewildered enemy has been hopelessly shattered. There will be no more resistance!

"These things you know. These things your great Churchill and Stalin and Roosevelt and Chiang Kai-shek have already told you.

"*But—but,* Peoples of Earth, already I sense a new conflict growing amongst you. It is not yet evident to

the senses of any but one who is able to look upon the situation without prejudice—myself, Bess-Istra! I see a new monster rising amongst you—and that monster is—*indecision!*

"What shall you do with your world, now? What shall you do with the conquered peoples? How will you rebuild? *Who shall acquire what territories? What shall you do with Hitler?*"

BESS-ISTRA'S voice dropped a tensed note. Bill stiffened, a sudden hollow fear growing in his mind. What was she saying? What was she planning to do?

As if she knew he was asking the question, Bess-Istra's gold-flecked eyes locked with his, filled with a taunting, controlled rage—that was directed at Bill. Then she spoke again, almost hissing the words out, they were so clearly articulated:

"These are the questions that will rise amongst you, and cause an ill-feeling that may never be erased. Therefore, peoples of Earth—" the girl from the stars drew a deep breath that shivered the clustered diadem of jewels on her breast, "—I am going to solve these problems for you!"

Bess-Istra's arm raised high, and she cried, "Peoples of Earth, know that I, Bess-Istra, now take control of the planet Earth! Know that I am your new ruler; know that I, with my irresistible ship, having freed you, now take my reward: People of Earth, your planet is—*mine!*"

Bill never knew what happened. Not much of it, anyway. His brain snapped. Broke. A purple flame shot sky-high across his vision. Perhaps he screamed. Perhaps not. But suddenly he found himself face to face with Bess-Istra, his hands outstretched like claws. He vaguely saw Bandro leaping toward him. Saw Sab-Hallo's jaw fall.

And then saw Bess-Istra step back one step, pulling at the gun on her curving hip. Bill knew it was the spastic gun, which could kill so completely. He didn't care. He tried to get the gun, and the gun raised, and behind him he heard the Reverend John Stevens crying, "Bill! Bill!" in an agonized voice, and then little lights winked in the gun . . . and Bill fell!

Fell, knotted up, brain scalded with burning thoughts, and traveled interminably through a warped tunnel of pain.

And was sharply unconscious.

CHAPTER IX

In Captivity

HE CAME out of it, fighting, yelling, squirming with an unbearable nightmare. Hands were on his arms, strong arms held him down. He relaxed. His eyes snapped opened. The drawn face of the Reverend John Stevens looked down at him.

"Bill!" Stevens choked. "Oh, God! You were right—*right!* She never had the good of the world in mind at all. She just brought peace to the world so that she could take over more easily!"

His face was twisted with the unmatchable pain of young love betrayed.

"Courage," said Bill. "Stiff upper lip. And all that sort of thing."

His thoughts were colder than dry ice. And as brittle. He could speak normally, and flippantly, and he could sit up now, locking his arms around his knees, sighing bleakly, and looking around at their prison. A dark prison with a grated door stingily admitting checkered light from the corridor lights outside.

His lips settled into a savage humor. He locked eyes with Stevens.

"You lost your head, too, Johnny?"

"Yes! I couldn't stand by—and after all, I was so bitterly—so bitterly disappointed." He could speak no more and bowed his head.

Bill grasped his arm in a single strong, comforting squeeze. He shook his head slowly back and forth, in profound amazement. "We should have known, Johnny. Boy, were we the uckersays! Why didn't you stick to your guns? You thought she was a devil in the first place, until—"

"Until she told us she was going to bring peace to the world," Stevens whispered hopelessly. "I didn't think—I didn't have any reason to think there might be another purpose behind it, Bill. She—"

"Skip it. I was almost taken in myself. I *was* taken in, I guess. But I was so enthusiastic about ending the war, that I sort of figured we'd get that out of the way, get the world to perking happily again, and then somehow we could deal with Bess-Istra, if she was as dangerous as I thought she might be. And—" suddenly he was biting at his lip "—and I guess I was hoping that maybe she wasn't that kind of a gal. I was hoping that—well, I guess I was hoping that she could be—converted . . ."

Stevens looked up swiftly. His touch on Bill's arm was impulsive. "Bill," he breathed. "Bill, you're in love with her, too!"

"What? Huh? Say!" Bill's lips curled in a black snarl. He jerked his arm away as if Stevens were contaminating it. "Don't give me any of that, you hopeless idiot! Why I couldn't any more fall in love with that—that—"

He stopped, paled. Stevens was regarding him with the sad smile of a man who is very, very wise.

His shoulders fell. Slowly, as if the burden of his thoughts were weighting

down his head, his eyes sought the floor and stared blurrily at nothing.

DAYS, slow days, passed. Their prison was little less than an over-size cage deep in the bowels of the ship. There were toilet facilities, two low couches with silk coverlets, and two acceleration chairs.

The latter were of course useful. Frequently, a little red light winked on above the door, accompanied by a sharp, warning bell. Then Stevens and Bill would get into the chairs, and when the ship moved, the acceleration would not hurt them.

The ship was going places and doing things. Where and what?

Questions thudded dully in Bill's brain. Bess-Istra was making herself the world's ruler, undoubtedly, consolidating her power. But what was she going to do with the world? How? And what was she going to do with Hitler? *Make friends with him?*

What was she going to do with those murderous Japs and Nazis? *Treat them like brothers, because maybe she was like them?*

Bill jumped up, paced back and forth along the length of the room, chewing at his nails. By God! He knew what he'd do with Hitler, the damned, sneaking, foul-minded bit of human filth who had brought misery and starvation and death and humiliation unbearable to millions of innocent people. Or did he know? What could you do to him? What punishment would fit the crime?

The question was as maddening as those questions concerning the ends of time and space.

Maybe you should just kill him cleanly, get him out of the way, and to heck with punishment and red tape; Hitler would be dead.

Now Admiral Tojol. There was a guy! His punishment was simple. And

very slight and not to be feared by such an admirable guy. Douse him in gasoline, touch him off with a safety match or a chromium plated cigarette lighter, and chase him up and down the street. Jap soldiers did that to the Chinese, and if the poor Chinese could take it, that Admiral Tojo certainly could—

"I'm going nuts!"

"You are taking it too hard, Bill," Stevens said in distressed tones. "If you would—"

"If I would sit down and pray! I'll leave it to you, Johnny! But I want some information. If only that guard who brings us our food would talk."

"Perhaps he does not know the English tongue."

"Nuts! I'm telling you he does. So does every other soldier that Bess-Istra brought along from that damnable planet of hers. Bess-Istra had Bandro or Sab-Hallo put one of those helmet things on and transfer his knowledge of the tongue to a soldier who in turn taught others in the same way, and so on. Sure, they know the English language. 'Cause why? Because Bessy is going to use them in ruling the world!"

The red light above the door suddenly winked. The warning bell rang. Bill hopped into his acceleration chair with a curse. Stevens followed.

They sat there for a few minutes. Then a blue light glowed, and a piping whistle sounded. The ship was motionless again. And where were they?

Who knew? They might even be out in space.

THEY weren't, though. Two weeks passed, two weeks of maddening inactivity to Bill. He was essentially an active type, active of body and mind. Neither found profitable exercise in that cage. But at the end of those two weeks, there were double footsteps in the corri-

dor without. The guard swung the door open, admitted the person with him, and then closed the door with a bang, and rested a slim shining weapon in the grating, pointing it accurately at Bill while he faced—Bess-Istra!

His heart went out to her, impulsively—until he remembered. Her beauty, her lips which he felt could have been tender, the quality of strength, feminine strength that was wholesome, deep in her eyes, evident in her firmly set jaw, the glorious perfection of her body that was meant for the arms of a husband—these things he must ignore. He must remember only what she really was.

"Well?" said Bill. "How's your little planet getting along? Did every body scrub his teeth this morning?"

"It is late at night, Bill."

"I should be sleeping then. Guess we'll go to bed so our company can go home. Good-night!"

Her eyelids flickered. She said, in a small, tight voice, "Bill, I have come to you because I need your help."

He said dryly, "Uh-huh! What's the matter? Did Hitler escape? Or have you toadied up to him? Maybe you two would make a good pair."

He could have cut his tongue out as soon as he said it. He noticed now that there were dark circles under her eyes; noticed lines of strain about her mouth. But she said nothing to the accusation.

"Hitler," she said, "is being tried along with all his friends and Axis partners at a newly-formed World Court—tried in what is known as the democratic manner. And every German and every Jap and every Italian who ever performed an atrocity on any innocent person, and against whom any evidence can be found, will similarly be tried."

"You don't say!" Bill suddenly began to feel slightly crazy. "And where did you get that idea?"

She frowned at him. "It was a prom-

ise made by the President of the United States long before I came to the planet of your God the Lord."

"I told her about it," Stevens broke in dully.

"Well!" said Bill. "Well, well, well! Let me get this straight, Bess-Istra. Are you the ruler of the world?"

She studied him with eyes that suddenly grew alive again with insolence.

"This planet, O Bill, is mine!" she cried. "And I *am* its ruler. I am the supreme head of all governments. And the heads of those governments are merely figure heads who must take orders from me, must abide by my decisions, on pain of punishment."

"Have any of them," Bill asked with a twisted smile, "failed to cooperate with you so far?"

"No! They dare not. They know my power. They have transmitted my orders to their inferiors. The battle fleets of the world, O Bill, are now in dry-dock under my orders. They are being scrapped—scrapped down to the destroyer. And that scrap is being used to supply industry. And all the aircraft of the world are being scrapped also."

BILL eased himself into the acceleration chair because he felt he had to sit down. He tapped on the arm of the chair for a long moment before he spoke again. His face was a study.

He said, "Doesn't a prosperous world need ocean liners—passenger planes? Couldn't those battlewagons and bombers be converted into commercial vehicles?"

Her hands were on her hips in scorn. "No! There will be no antiquated means of transportation on my world, Bill. Hereafter, trade shall be carried on with huge transports which work on the principle of light-thrust—the same principle that impelled this space-ship across a void unutterable. Nor will I

tolerate the outworn mode of currency. Already, an international currency which I have devised with the help of certain well-known economists is in the first stages of development.

"Already, false trade barriers such as tariffs have been outlawed. And the geography of the world is being rearranged, Bill, according to racial groups, to languages, to traditional backgrounds. That continent which you call Europe will be divided into nine distinct nationalities—only nine. Each country will be of sufficient strength, possess sufficient natural resources, that it need never fear an aggressor nation."

"Boy!" said Bill, looking askance at her. "You sure do walk where angels fear to tread! Or maybe they haven't walked there because they couldn't. Too much red tape. But the dictator tramples over many conventions, eh?"

And she said serenely, "I have accomplished many things, Bill. I am remaking the outworn social pattern of the planet of your God the Lord—remaking it according to what I conceive would be His wishes."

Bill was staggered. He could have been no more winded if somebody had jolted him in the stomach. He didn't believe it. It was beyond the realm of common sense. She was a lying, cheating hell-cat, and anybody with a grain of brain should know it. So why didn't he jump up and tell her off?—in spite of the almost childishly pleased expression she wore?

He couldn't! He was going to be a fool and fall for it!

Nor could Stevens. Nor did Stevens want to. Stevens was like a man who suddenly sees the sun where there had been only palling cumulus heaps.

"Miss Bess!" he cried, his face radiantly transfigured. "You mean you believe—you believe in that which I have told you?"

For a moment there was a flicker in her eyes. Then she nodded solemnly. "Yes! I believe—I believe in your God the Lord! The principles he lays down seem very efficient."

Stevens tried to speak, and choked up. Bill got embarrassed.

"Okay, okay, okay! So she believes!" He was inwardly fuming, alive with cynicism. He blazed, "Skip it! Let's get down to bedrock, Bess-Istra. You came here—why?"

"For your help."

"What kind of help?"

HER eyes dropped. Her fingers twisted together. "The readers of your column in many newspapers have been clamoring for your return, O Bill. And I wish you to return. And this time, I wish you to dwell on—well, to dwell more on me as subject matter, instead of the great things that I do."

Bill's hands went to his hips. He laughed a short, barking laugh. "A press agent!" he cried scornfully.

"Yes. I want you to write me down as one who loves his fellow men."

Bill sneered at Stevens. "Hi, there, Abou ben Adam!" He turned back to Bess-Istra. "But why do you need somebody to extol your virtues when you've already squelched a man-sized war? The people probably worship you, don't they?"

"No!" A bleak dread grew in her eyes, a humid mistiness of sudden bewilderment. "Bill, somehow there is a traitor in my own camp. A traitor who is giving information concerning me to the newspapers. Who is trying to turn the people of the world against me. And who is succeeding!"

"Because," Bill snapped, piercing her gold-flecked eyes clear to the roots of her brain, "it's true?"

"True? True?" Her eyes took fire. "Of course it is true—but the people

misinterpret. They do not realize—"

Bill wearily ran his hand through his crisp dark hair. He shook his head in long helpless arcs. "And I'll wager that Hitler is screaming his head off right now in that World Court, saying that people don't understand! Nuts! Listen, Bess-Istra!"

He took a stance, his face hard.

"I'm going to take that press agenting job—and I'll turn out plenty of guff for the world to sloop up. But lay off the Pollyanna act when you're around me. Don't go out of your way to show Johnny and me how religion changed your life—because you know and I know that it didn't! Get it? Okay. Let me at my typewriter!"

He started toward the door.

And Bess-Istra struck him. Lashed at him with the full force of her palm. Brought him to an utter, confounded standstill.

"Beast!" she cried. "Pig!"

She kicked him in the shins, at the same time raised her hand. The door opened. She stepped into the corridor. She turned and spoke ragingly to Stevens: "Come, Johnny! There are more truths that I would learn from you concerning the ethics of your religion."

She moved down the corridor, tiny bells on the hem of her short garment jangling to the rhythm of her step.

Stevens stared after her like a man shocked. Then he went out the door—like a moth that is soon to be devoured by the flame?

Bill stood there, fists knotted.

"Do that again, Bess-Istra," he vowed very softly through his teeth, "and it gives—murder!"

CHAPTER X

Treachery

AS THE weeks, the months passed, Bill van Astor-Smythe was glad

that he had taken his job—for *Bess-Istra literally changed the world!*

Changed it, utterly remade it!

Sab-Hallo, the squat scientist, was put in charge of industry. Soon, all airplane plants and shipyards were turning out great transports which moved by the unique principle of light-thrust. Were engaged in manufacturing small, one-man "gliders," which really weren't gliders at all, but motorized craft on which the driver lay at full length.

New methods of mining were introduced. A new kind of power-machine was developed which harnessed free energy formed by the rotation of Earth's magnetic field through space. A weather machine was tested by Sab-Hallo, and was turned out in large quantities. There would never again be famine on the planet Earth! Climate could be controlled!

All over the world the illustrious change took place. China was reborn, as modern industrial machinery flowed in to take the place of laboring coolies. And the Chinese did not suffer because the machines took only a few minutes to do what formerly took hours; their standard of living was simply raised, their leisure, time increased. And so it was, over the whole world.

Bess-Istra ruthlessly discarded outmoded systems of government. Expensive and useless bureaus were dispensed with.

The world was rebuilt. A new London, glowing lustrous, raised on the ruins of the old. Scorched earth was treated with chemicals that made it productive again.

Bess-Istra, seeking for some means to keep order in the world, created an International Police, with Bandro as the Chief Officer. The thousand soldiers she brought with her were recruited for their duties in this organization. On

the breast of each was the symbol of Bess-Istra—the blood-red scimitar. And as the Scimitars was this International Police known.

Bill didn't get along with Bandro; nor with Sab-Hallo for that matter. He didn't trust either of them. He didn't like the idea of those two having so much power. Bandro and his Scimitars could be a terrifically dangerous power in the world!

Bill mentioned this to Bess-Istra. But he didn't get very far with it; an hostility existed between him and Bess-Istra which, while it never broke out, yet existed, like a slumbering volcano.

Sometimes Bill was convinced that Bess-Istra hated him with violent passions, still remembered his denouncement of her. At other times, he was almost inclined to believe that she sought to get under the hard shell of indifference in which he clothed himself when she was around; was tender, almost yielding. At such times it was hard to restrain himself. He was convinced she was a devil girl from the stars—but sometimes his desire for her was almost overwhelming. And he hated himself for it.

BILL watched the actions of the Reverend John Stevens with a smoldering eye. Stevens now was pastor of the largest church in Washington in his denomination! His fame had apparently been such these past weeks that he was offered the post. But in between times, Stevens was apparently trying to convert Bess-Istra to his faith.

"Grow up," Bill said wrathfully. "You were practically a kid as far as brains went when I picked you up in the jungle. Now that you've gotten loose in the world, you're running wild. Falling in love with that—!"

"But—but she—"

"She nothing! I'm beginning to get

an idea about that gal. Think it's religion that's making her remake the world? Nuts. One of these days we'll all wake up and discover that we'd be better off if we were still peacefully making war with Hitler. Oh, I'll keep on playing the game, and being fairly happy, and I'll let myself be lulled into security just like everybody else. But after that—" He slid his finger pictorially across his throat.

Stevens helplessly shook his head. "Bill—Bill there can be nothing deceitful about her. I know!"

"Hm." Bill was morose. "Wait until things begin to crack—you'll change your mind."

But in spite of these occasional black thoughts, it seemed to Bill that Utopia was on the way!

He marveled at it openly, convincing himself all over again that Bess-Istra was on the up and up. But Bill knew that he was somewhat responsible for these brightening prospects. His articles swept the world from pole to pole. He turned out reams of material in which Bess-Istra was the utterly desirable heroine.

Bess-Istra visits the poor and promises the world that the era of poverty has come to an end!

Bess-Istra takes to her sick-bed after an exhausting conference with the great men of the world—a conference which will cure more of humanity's woes than all similar conferences of the hundred years just past!

Bess-Istra is offered a screen role by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, the offer turned down because Bess-Istra wants to serve her people!

To Bill's credit, most of the items were basically true. But sometimes he distorted them to a sob-sister angle. And he knew that her popularity was becoming enormous.

Even a dictator such as Bess-Istra

needed the support of the people.

But—and it was like the ominous clang of a muted cymbal—someone was trying to undermine the good will the people felt toward Bess-Istra! Articles concerning her past were being published openly. Bill suspected that Bandro was behind it; but he said nothing.

And one day, with an appalling rush, the dam of events—*broke!*

Bess-Istra faced him that day and said grayly, "I will not suppress the news, O Bill, because this is a world of free speech! It is a democratic world."

"You're a funny one, Bess-Istra," he snapped. "You're a dictator, with unlimited power. You rule a planet that is alien to you. Yet you act sometimes as if you actually give a damn about the people of this planet, when anybody with any sense at all knows that the only love which impels you is the love of power! Just as the articles which some papers print accuse you of a base love of power, and reveal events on that other planet which must make you cringe. Why *don't* you stop those articles? I would if I had the power. I'm interested in making people love you!"

THEY stood facing each other in the lavishly colored suite of a white plastic building from which Bess-Istra administered the affairs of a world. Bill was dressed in a cellu-suit which looked and felt like nub tweed, but as a matter of fact it was a certain grade of paper. Bill had paid one unit of currency for it, which amounted to about sixty cents of the old money. Tonight Bill would throw it in a boiler and run the suit down the drain and tomorrow would put on another suit.

There was nothing humble about Bess-Istra. She carried herself with an imperious dignity, carried herself like a ruler. But more than once she had

taken Bill's outright insults without more than a hardening of her perfect lips.

"Do they love me, Bill?" she grated.

"Naturally. But would they if I didn't play you up as a goddess in your own right?"

"Yes!" She blazed out the word, taking a step toward him. "They would see beneath everything, and would know that I think of them. Johnny knows, O Bill! It was he who showed me the light. It was he who— Oh, Bill!"

He was amazed to see the hot emotion drain from her glorious features; amazed to see the flood of tears that washed suddenly from her eyes. And somehow, he would never know in what manner, he was very close to her, enough to feel the warmth of her body, to see the throbbing pulse in her creamy throat. Her eyes were half-closed, and her lips were up-raised.

Bill was held rooted, with a hopeless passion. Oh, damn, and damn! Why did things have to happen this way? She was an alien woman, and God only knew what alien thoughts might go on in her mind. What was her purpose in acting like this? Or was there a purpose?

"Oh, Bill," she whispered, and a sob caught in her throat, "only you do not know—you and Bandro and Sab-Hallo, who think me wicked!"

Who thought her wicked? And why not? Hadn't Bill read about her struggle for power on another planet? How she had enslaved millions, geared them to a world order meant to satisfy her every whim?

And yet—Bill ground his teeth on the paradoxical thought—on *this* planet she had so far exhibited none of that cruelty!

He looked down at her parted lips. at her face that was wrenched by a kind of childish misery. He knew, with

horrible knowledge, that it must be as Stevens said—that he was beginning to love her! Beginning to love her in spite of the fact that she had toyed with the affections of her arch-enemy, the prime minister of another planet, who had overthrown her; in spite of the accusations made against her in anonymous newspaper articles that she had—murdered! In spite of her conquest and enslavement of the people of another planet, so that she might satiate her base lust for power!

He groaned abjectly. It was useless. She was like a child, bewilderment of some kind eating acidly at her soul. Some alchemy had taken place in her, and she was altogether lovable—

"Bess-Istra!" he choked humbly. "Oh, Bess—Bess—"

His hands closed about her soft shoulders. He drew her fiercely toward him, crushed her lips to his—or tried to!

AT THE last second, he sensed with awful foreknowledge her treachery—her deceit! Her eyes opened widely. A laugh tinkled from deep within her being as she thrust herself away from him, took a stance a few feet away, her whole mien changed to one of living scorn.

"Fool!" she said. "Utter fool for believing you could capture the love of Bess-Istra! Now you suffer. From the first, you had no kind word for me—treated me at once like one who is to be spat upon."

She burst into a wild laugh while his face was drenched in a ghastly whiteness that was like the color of a corpse.

She thrust up a quivering arm, and her gold-flecked eyes flashed with savage passions that he had never before seen there.

Her voice grated:

"You are a strong man. O Bill, and

cynical beyond your years. You have never known real pain, the pain that I have known—when I was a slave-girl in the Temple of Stuz, and the priests of cruelty reviled me as you have reviled me. But now you will know pain—pain that will endure in you forever—"

Bill strode forward. "The pain that endures in Johnny Stevens, witch," he blazed, outraged beyond reason.

He would have killed her. Would have killed her though she had drawn her ever-present spastic gun; for, as he advanced, with his hideous purpose written clear on his face, she fell back one step, two. He heard the controls of the spastic-gun, deadly weapon, clack around; knew that Bess-Istra had set the gun so that destroying vibrations would lash out.

And yet she did not pull the trigger!

Bill would have killed her, for on her face was written her inability to spray him with those deadly vibrations—her inability to murder in cold blood. He advanced on her like Colossus—but stopped dead still as a tittering burst of laughter lanced through the lustrous, glowing room.

The tittering of scientist, Sab-Hallo!

Bill had a flash of intuition, for his consuming rage must have made him super-sensitive. His nerves twanged with an abrupt dread.

He whirled; even as Bess-Istra whirled in the same direction. And both faced not only Sab-Hallo but—a full dozen of Bandro's International Police, each of whom held to the ready a squat black weapon trained squarely on Bill and Bess-Istra!

CHAPTER XI

Johnny Stevens, Sky-Pilot

"REMAIN still, or you die immediately!"

The squat little scientist's voice lashed out, filled with smirking undertones.

Silence held. Bill was rooted. At last came Bess-Istra's voice, robbed of moisture.

"What means this, Sab-Hallo? Disband these Scimitars at once! Know you not that I will flay you alive if your purpose be what I think it?"

But Sab-Hallo laughed a deadly little laugh.

"The days when Bess-Istra may wreak her will on others," he said venomously, "are—*done!* The days when Bess-Istra may misuse the glorious science that I, Sab-Hallo, have prepared for her, are—*finished!*"

His broad face writhed suddenly with an unnameable passion—perhaps of hate. Then it was quiet again.

"You know why we overthrow you, Mistress Bess," he said into the silence that seethed inside Bill's temples. "For we *are* overthrowing you. Often we have asked you—demanded of you that you treat the people of Earth as a conquered race must be treated. You spurned us!

"The troublesome ones who lead the Axis armies still live! *Fah* for such inefficiency! The very nations which harbor the seed of future rebellions against us continue to exist. Germany and Japan must, and shall be—destroyed!

"And now, Mistress Bess—in a few moments, you shall see how I and my confidante, Bandro, conduct a trial—*not by the democratic method!*"

"Bandro!" The word broke from the lips of Bess-Istra. Shocked bewilderment was on her face. "Bandro, who told me of his love! And you, Sab-Hallo, whom I rescued from a wretched hovel and brought to greatness. Traitors! Traitors both!"

"Traitors," he agreed, and his laugh

tittered out again. "But from this moment on, the planet Earth is ours to do with as we please! Technician-Scimitar, adjust the television controls to the interior of the World Court where Hitler is being endlessly tried for his deeds!"

THE Technician-Scimitar broke from the massed group of International Police, approached the *tele-radio*. In another moment, there was revealed on the screen a picture of the interior of the World Court, where the villainous men who had started the war were being tried.

There was no audition, merely sight. And Bill saw Hitler. The little man was seated at a table beneath the judge's platform. It was only one of many times that Bill had thus seen Hitler, and he looked woodenly at that despicable face.

It was a mass trial, and seated near Hitler were others of the same foul breed.

"Watch!" Sab-Hallo broke out softly. "Watch! The moment draws near!"

At various entrances to that square, extravagantly guarded court-room were heavily armed International Police, with the blood-red scimitar, symbol of Bess-Istra's reign, on their shirts.

Bill knew that no faction, with the possible intent of rescuing the Axis leaders, could break into that court-room.

And yet he had the conviction that something unscheduled was going to happen.

Something did!

Bill heard Bess-Istra gasp, saw Sab-Hallo's broadening grin as every Scimitar in the courthouse sprang to attention, threw open the doors, and admitted other hordes of Scimitars! They came running down the aisles and onto the rostrum where sat the dozen men

who had betrayed the world.

And at their head was—Bandro!

The courtroom was in pandemonium. But Bandro raised his hands, and shouted out a few sentences. The International Police drew their weapons and menaced the crowd, which had become evidently hostile.

And Bandro stepped toward Hitler and the others, and without warning drew two weapons, which he trained on them.

Bill found himself panting with dread. "Don't," he cried in agony. "Don't do it!"

"But he shall," ground out Sab-Hallo. "It is the only way to dispose of trouble-makers—the democratic way is outmoded! The people of Earth will soon learn that!"

And suddenly it was over. Mussolini, Goering, Tojo and the Japs, Hitler must have realized the terrible fate in store for them. Their reactions were different. Some continued to sit, frosty-eyed. Some clattered to their feet, screaming, cowering. And as livid red bursts of flame poured toward the arch-traitors from Bandro's viciously held guns, Bill caught one glimpse of Adolph Hitler before he vanished in a puff of thick, oily smoke, saw his screaming, hideously distorted face—distorted as if in the last moment of his terrible, terrible life he suddenly understood, with a bright awful clarity, what he had done. . . .

Smoke rolled away and where *they* had been was only formless vacancy.

The scene flicked off. Bill turned dumbly toward Sab-Hallo.

"What good will it do?" he asked through parched lips.

And Sab-Hallo drew his own weapon, a smaller variety of the flame-gun which Bandro had used.

"The same good," he said viciously, "as it will to rid the world of my Mis-

tress Bess and of—you!"

BESS-ISTRA looked at her former pawn without visible reaction. Bill knew what her thoughts were. It was evident that by giving Bandro charge of the International Police, she had literally given him control of the world. The International Police in the World Court had acted according to a pre-arranged plan.

Bandro and Sab-Hallo had held out to them rich prizes in wealth and in power; had promised them a world to loot; while Bess-Istra had insisted on keeping her soldiers to the rigid law and order demanded by democratic rule.

Bill knew whose side he was on!

But how was he to overcome this cruel, conceited toad of a man? This Sab-Hallo, who had probably been responsible for those articles intended to undermine the faith of the people in Bess-Istra?

Bandro, in spite of Sab-Hallo's declaration that Bandro was merely his pawn, was very likely the real leader of the movement, and was merely using Sab-Hallo. But Sab-Hallo had to be taken care of first.

Bill knew in his heart that it was hopeless. Even now, Sab-Hallo was about to depress the trigger, and all the glorious beauty that was Bess-Istra would be gone forever.

Bill van Astor-Smythe knew it was suicide to charge the squat scientist, but in him was the hot necessity of at least fighting and dying. Merely to die was not his idea of dignity. His muscles tensed, and—

He never jumped! For his eyes suddenly raised to the great window at the far side of the room, a single invisible pane of glass which melted into the walls, and through which he could see the Washington Monument. And driving straight toward that pane of glass

with terrific speed came one of the strange, other-world gliders that Bess-Istra had introduced to this world.

On it came, and there was a man spread-eagled on it on his stomach, shielded from the slip stream by a conical, fanning guard of cimarite.

On it came, at such an angle that neither Sab-Hallo nor his men could see it!

Crashed through the window, sent shards spinning in a thousand directions!

And from its nose as it halted above the heads of the whirling Sab-Hallo and his men, came—the gas-ray!

In a moment, the men who had menaced Bill and Bess-Istra's life had fallen unconscious. Sab-Hallo alone was not caught. He swore lividly, vanished out the door.

The glider landed at the far corner of the suite, where the two rescued people had run to escape any possible gas.

And the Reverend Johnny Stevens, quite literally a sky-pilot, jumped from the glider!

CHAPTER XII

Jungle Retreat

"JOHNNY!" Bill's relief vented itself in a scream. "You old son-of-a-gun, why didn't you come two minutes sooner! I almost fried of sight. I'm as white as a wheat. I mean wheat as a sheet—"

"Never mind!" Stevens cried. "Sab-Hallo has escaped. He will bring others. We'll be pursued. Oh, quickly!"

Bess-Istra lost no time in taking full advantage of a critical situation. She was onto the glider, strapping herself to one side of the broad metal center piece. Bill strapped himself beside her, and Stevens, with complete lack of ministerial dignity, threw himself atop

them, grabbed the U-bar, plunged it home, and twisted it.

The glider rose like a shot, whipped around, and flung itself through the shattered window, and in another moment was boring its frantic way through the atmosphere five miles above solid ground!

The escape had been made; but death would soon be on the trail.

IT WAS not cold. It seemed as if there were warm air-currents, of normal atmosphere pressure, surrounding the strange ship. Both the warmth and the pressure were generated by the very speed of the craft's flight through the thinner air.

"A ship!" Bill suddenly cried, twisting his head around to look into the backward distance. "We're being pursued! Johnny, where are you taking this crate?"

And Stevens replied, shouting above the wind, "We're being chased, and he who chases us thinks to destroy us. And there is only one place in all this world which I truly call home."

Bill grinned widely. "Mozambique! Portuguese East Africa! Your mission house!"

"Exactly. The house of the Lord. The Lord is my shepherd and he has led me into strange pastures, but now I am returning." His face, that had seemed so young, so freshly naive, now seemed inexpressibly—and sadly—older. He said austere, "Brother—sister—the Lord our God will protect us, will fill us full of divine faith. We cannot lose."

"Hmm," Bill said, in a vaguely skeptical tone, as he saw that the furiously driven craft which pursued them was scarcely three miles distant.

Stevens explained to Bill how he had come to know that Sab-Hallo and Bandro were plotting the downfall of Bess-

Istra, were going to depose her without so much as a struggle.

"As you know," he said sorrowfully, "my proximity to the adventures which have so changed the world have given me considerable notoriety. I was offered the largest church of my faith in Washington—"

He stopped as Bess-Istra raised her dark head and smiled tawnily. "Because I, Bess-Istra," she stated, "asked that you be offered such a post!"

"You!"

"Yes! Already I know what you are about to tell me, O Johnny. Many Scimitars attended your church. Scimitars who knew of the plot that was brewing against me! It was I who suggested that they attend the religious services with which you worship the Lord your God. A suggestion is—a command! And I knew—"

"And you knew," Bill exclaimed, "that probably at least one of the Scimitars would get religion and blab to Johnny about the plot! Snappy thinking! But—well, it almost didn't work out."

And Stevens nodded soberly. "One of the Scimitars who discovered the wonderful light of the Lord told me that you and Mistress Bess were to be slain shortly. I came as quickly as I could—"

AN HOUR of driving speed followed.

Below them, the shadowy outline of Florida was lost in distance, gave way to ocean as they fled out over the Atlantic. And behind them came not only one, not only two, but three of the slim, wickedly constructed light-thrust ships used by the International Police.

Death was on the trail!

Bill looked sidewise at Bess-Istra. She lay flat on her stomach. Her gloriously tinted features were calm, fully controlled. Again Bill felt an over-

whelming tenderness for her—until he remembered her deceit. Then he wanted to throttle her. He ground his teeth.

Bess-Istra spoke after a long silence. "I do not think we will be able to escape from this with our lives," she said calmly.

And Stevens ground out, "We shall! We must! The peace and happiness of the whole world is at stake, Mistress Bess! Under your rule, mankind was truly progressing to a promised land. Under that of Bandro and Sab-Hallo—I shudder to think of what horror will be perpetrated!"

And as if his faith truly preserved them, they made the Portuguese East African jungle, swooped down to a landing just as the three craft following them had gained to less than a thousand feet behind!

They were forced to land in that sea of foliage because from the nose of the foremost craft a cone of light was emitted.

"The green ray of destruction!" Bess-Istra panted in a dreadful voice. She unstrapped herself from the glider. "Oh, quickly! Do as I say. The green ray will be swept over this entire strip of jungle, killing all insects, all animals, all organisms of any kind. And it will kill us unless you come very close to me—for I have a *bik*!"

"A *bik*!" cried Bill. "But I thought there were no *biks* on this planet, that there was no protection against the green ray!"

"I brought but one *bik* with me from my planet. One that I had hidden in the Citadel where I was driven by my enemies."

It was the first time she had ever made truthful reference to her past life. And Bill was amazed to see starlet tears on her lashes. But he knew now was no time to waste trying to solve this

enigmatic girl. He saw clutched in her hand a tiny round metal object from which small studs protruded. She plucked at the studs—and part by part, the round ball expanded until it was a full foot in diameter, flat, however; in appearance it seemed much like a loop antenna.

"Come close," she cried, and the two men immediately moved toward her until their bodies were touching warmly. She held the *bik* between them. "It will draw the energies of the green ray much as a lightning rod draws lightning. There is only the difference that the *bik* will store those energies—and if it receives too much may explode and tear up a full mile of jungle! There! *The green ray!*"

SHE pointed with her free hand—and Bill's blood froze as he saw a light-thrust ship sweep over the massed jungle foliage, from its belly coming a thick green beam.

There was a roaring awful sound as the beam swept through the jungle scarcely thirty feet distant. And Bill immediately smelled roasted flesh—the roasted flesh of hapless creatures of the jungle.

"Missed us!"

But the ship overhead, though it could not have seen the three fugitives in this equatorial gloom, was thorough. It criss-crossed overhead at tremendous speed until it seemed that the only spot in that locality that had not been touched was that where they stood huddled.

Bill hoped fiercely that the green beam would miss them. He didn't trust the *bik*!

But suddenly he knew the ray was going to touch them. It swept toward them, walking on one livid leg through the jungle. Ghastly sweat grew on his forehead; he felt Stevens and Bess-

Istra tense. And then the ray was on them!

They were bathed in intolerable brilliance. The *bik* leaped with fire. And then the beam was gone—and they were alive!

After that, Bill no longer feared the ray. Seven times it swept over them before the last of the three ships which had pursued them disappeared. Then Bess-Istra dropped the *bik* to the ground; a *bik* that was crawling with energies titanic.

"We must leave—and quickly!" Bess-Istra whispered. "We have no instrument which can discharge the stored energies in the *bik*. If it explodes before we are far enough away—"

The glider rose with its human load after a long, agonizing minute of preparation. It flitted slowly between the branches of squat baobab trees. They could not rise above the jungle, because they had no assurance that their enemy did not still linger. But the explosion, when it came, literally caught the glider up and threw it high into the air.

Stevens brought it out with frantic effort—just as it was about to crash. Ghastly sweat streamed from Bill's face as the glider again floated along, smoothly. Three human beings, the hope of the world, were safe and alive!

And hope ran higher still, when Stevens brought the glider to a smooth landing in the lonely courtyard of his jungle mission.

Shock awaited them, however. Thomas Reynolds, Stevens' assistant, was dead in the little kitchen. Around the mission grounds were a number of Bantus, also dead. Bandro's ships, not content to take chances, had swept their green rays of death over this whole section of jungle for miles and miles around. All bird, reptile, insect, and animal life had been snuffed out; prob-

ably there was no human life within a day's journey.

"Damn Bandro!" Bill whispered with bitter, tearless rage.

CHAPTER XIII

The Translation

THE days passed swiftly. Bill knew they dare not leave their retreat—not yet. For Bandro was thorough and might be on the lookout.

But by means of the *tele*-radio built into the instrument panel of the glider, they kept track of world events.

And current history was truly in turmoil—hideous turmoil! Bandro had taken over the world with a vengeance. His International Police constricted over the world like a net. Thousands upon thousands of Japs and Nazis suspected of having performed war atrocities were executed summarily.

"Goodby democracy," Bill gritted. "When we abolish the trial system, no matter how heinous the crime, we abolish our whole way of life. Bandro may be doing a good thing by killing those people off. But he's not doing it for that reason. He's doing it because they might be trouble-makers."

Bill and Bess-Istra were alone before the *tele*-radio. Bill turned, surprised Bess-Istra with a tear sliding down her cheek. But it was not a tear of sympathy. It was a tear of humiliation and outrage.

"Someday," she whispered, "someday when I regain control of my world again, I shall throttle Bandro with my own hands!"

"I doubt," Bill said cuttingly, "if you will ever rule Earth again, Bess-Istra."

She whirled on him. She stood in a feline crouch, and from long force of habit, her hand fell to her weapon.

"Do not say that!" she cried.

"I'll say what I damn' well please," Bill told her, striding toward her. "You've pulled a gun on me once too often, lady. I was prevented from doing anything about it last time. Now it's different. *Give me that gun!*"

He wrenched it from her, threw it across the room. She burst into a strident scream of rage, flung herself at him with raking claws. He bent her wrists back, finally grasped her bare shoulders, held her rigid with steel-binged hands.

He bit out, "You lying little beast! Actions speak louder than words. By desiring to kill Bandro you put yourself in the same class as Bandro. You've deceived me and you've deceived Johnny. All that guff about your believing in his religion!"

Her eyes grew big and round. The rosy color drained from her perfect cheeks. She whispered chokingly, "I believe in your God the Lord!"

"Our God the Lord, you should say if you meant it—which you don't!"

"Our God the Lord, then!" she blazed. "I believe in Him. I have modeled this planet according to His wishes. The people of Earth were knowing perfect peace under my rule."

"You're still dangerous for all of that, Bess-Istra!" His gaze on her was hard and penetrating, searing into her soul with pitiless knowledge.

She completely lost control. She screamed rackingly, kicked with her legs. He held her off, swearing bitterly under his breath. At last he spun her around, slammed her against the wall.

"You have remodeled Earth by theory," he panted, "not because you *feel* that what you have done is right. Superficially, you admire the God of this planet. He is something new to you. He offers a new method for you to gain power—to gain power through a selfish type of kindness. But in-

wardly—in your heart of hearts—you still worship the diabolical, merciless Goddess Stuz!"

A MORTAL pallor swept her face. He sneered bitterly, "Yes! I know your history, Bess-Istra. I picked it up from bits you or Bandro or Sab-Hallo or some of your men let drop. And got plenty of it from some of the articles written against you. You were captured from your birthplace when still a child, were raised as a slave-girl in the Temple of Stuz. You were spat-upon, reviled by the very priests of that cruel religion. Instead of hating the Goddess Stuz and what she had brought upon you, you commenced to worship her yourself—believed that in cruelty lay power—in selfish barbaric willfulness lay true contentment. And so the spat-upon slave girl began to plot how she could conquer her planet. She met Sab-Hallo, whose resourceful brain invented weapons that ravaged the planet, put her on the throne. Unfortunately, her prime minister did not worship the Goddess Stuz—and so, Bess-Istra, your own armies and weapons were turned against you, and you had no protection! You fled. But you still worship Stuz!"

Bess-Istra looked at him with horrible fascination.

She said, "The Goddess Stuz must be dead—it has been so long ago—and there was new a God here—a strange God—and," she added in husky voice, "a wonderful God!"

Her breasts woke to life. She panted. She cried, "I no longer worship Stuz the cruel—I love the true God—but I must kill you, O Bill, for your arrogance!"

She came like thunder and lightning, nothing more than a beast alive with terrible emotions. Bill was borne backward, shielding his face. Then his mind grew crystal clear. He threw her off

balance, and while she teetered, struck her with savage fury with the flat of his hand.

She staggered back. Bill knew nothing save unutterable impatience, that was like madness. He had never struck a woman before. He would never strike another woman again, ever. But he struck Bess-Istra—punishingly, once, twice, thrice.

SHE slammed back against the wall. She looked at him through animal-dumb eyes, a painful confusion sweeping her face. Her legs gave way. She slid down along the wall. She crumpled up on the floor of the room, head buried in her arms.

Bill stood over her, panting.

Her body shook, soundlessly. And then with sobs. Long, racking sobs of a woman who knows an agony of mind that will never end.

Bill's voice shook violently when he spoke. He heard it through an avalanche of pounding blood in his own head.

"I shouldn't have done it, maybe. But I'm glad I did. I would have wanted someone to do it to me if it would help. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you—see? That's the Golden Rule. It embodies all tolerable religions in one form or another. The Goddess Stuz didn't know about it. And so you can't be blamed for your past on that other planet. Those people are dead anyway—dead and forgotten ages ago, along with Stuz. But you know that Rule now, Bess-Istra!"

After awhile her sobs quieted, but she still lay there, head buried, wilted like a plucked petal. Bill left, biting at his lip. Already he regretted his action. It would do no good. Bess-Istra was Bess-Istra. Unchangeable, evil!

An hour later in the mission yard, the

Reverend John Stevens quickly approached. Bill had been pacing up and down, scowling.

Rapture was on Stevens' face, a look of glorious fulfillment.

"Come!" he whispered. "Quickly! You must see this!"

They stood in the door of the chapel where black, fuzzy-haired African natives had worshipped a God that was new to them.

Bill shook. Kneeling at the altar, head bowed to floor level, silent and white and unmoving, was Bess-Istra. They watched her for many minutes. Finally she rose and moved down the aisle toward them. She faced them. The hard, selfish lines about mouth and eyes were gone as if they had never existed.

Her expression was so exalted, so filled with tenderness, that Bill was embarrassed. He knew without asking that Bess-Istra was — *changed!* Changed inwardly. She looked at him with a serene confidence and understanding that made him squirm.

She touched first Bill's, then Stevens' hand.

"My dearest friends—Johnny—Bill—I see things with such a different light, now. So different. We must soon make plans to loose the world from the terrible bondage that has been put on it by Bandro. We three alone. Even though we sacrifice our lives, it will be well worth it if man is made free again."

Stevens looked after her with the pride of a pastor in his flock; in his glowing eyes the light of a man in love.

Bill said softly; "Damn! Can you tie that?"

Bess-Istra's head was held high as she walked across the dusty compound, toward her room in the tiny south wing.

"Damn!" said Bill. "*She's got religion . . .*"

CHAPTER XIV

A Desperate Gamble

RELIGION, she had! An illustrious alchemy had taken place in her mind, and base metal was changed to gold. Her tears were real and pitying when the next shocking news came over the *tele-radio*.

Bandro sent scores of his ships filled with International Police over the cities of Tokyo and Berlin. And those ships, using every awful weapon known to that strange science, utterly killed every man, woman, and child in those cities! Utterly destroyed those cities until they were less than smoking cinder heaps!

And then proceeded indiscriminately to kill and destroy every living thing and every man-made object within a hundred miles.

Directly after this news was purveyed, Bandro spoke to the world; Bandro, dictator of Earth!

Bill was filled with revolted horror of the arch-murderer as he appeared on the television screen.

Of the silently sneering Bandro who had apparently been so subservient to Bess-Istra there was nothing left. Here was a man who was strong with the ferocity of a killer whale, and as bold.

"These people shall be punished," he cried to the world, flinging his hand up in terrible promise. "You shall learn that I, Bandro, will not tolerate these who brought you such horror. They and their works shall vanish. There will be unequalled prosperity on the planet Earth. And those amongst you who would menace the happiness of the others, shall be dealt with properly. And know you that my Scimitars, brave and true men, shall guard you from such plotters!"

In this vein he continued, for a half hour, subtly threatening the people to

submit to his tyranny. As such Bill recognized it. His heart sank. How could they overcome this man?

The destruction of the capital cities of Germany and Japan struck them all as needless butchery. And yet Bill, thinking it over, told Stevens and Bess-Istra what he believed in his heart to be true.

"Don't pity the people of those countries too much, even if Bandro does destroy them," he grated. "The people of Japan and Germany are hopelessly warped. The Japanese believe themselves to be the divine flower of the world, and worship their emperor as a god in his own right. They believe it is a privilege for 'inferior' races to be ruled by them. The same goes for the Germans. They literally believe themselves to be the chosen people. That belief has been drilled into them for long, long years.

"Nothing, only death, can completely erase the utter cruelty that has been bred into the very minds of those people! The utter conceit and treachery. The utter inhumanness.

"You should have seen Polish dead on the streets of Warsaw as I have—kicked into the gutter by Nazis. You should have seen starving Greeks, all the flesh gone from their bodies. You should have seen the piles of Greek bodies heaped like brushwood in the city streets. You should have seen Chinese coolies used for bayonet practice by Jap soldiers, while other Japs stood by and learned how it was done.

"Misery of the most refined sort means nothing to Japs and Germans—as long as it is not they who experience that misery. It may take more than kindness and love to change them—and maybe Bandro has the right answer . . ."

Bess-Istra's eyes flashed.

"No!" she cried softly. "Bandro's way will never be right, O Bill! Oh, Johnny—Bill—we must take the power away from Sab-Hallo and Bandro before they plunge the world into even greater misery than the terrible Axis powers! We must!"

And if either of the two men had ever had any doubts about the change of heart that had occurred in Bess-Istra, it was dispelled now by the shining tears pendant on the edge of her lashes.

ANOTHER month passed.

The three human beings lived off canned goods in the mission; and also off the cooked bodies of animals the green ray had killed.

But at the end of that month, into Bill's mind leaped the only way in which the gigantic project of freeing the world might be accomplished.

For the world was truly in the grip of a tyrant. Millions of soldiers and civilians in the conquered countries had been destroyed. Men walked in fear and trembling. Another Hitler walked the Earth. The Scimitars were but another Gestapo.

Religions had been discarded. Bandro was forcing humanity to worship—Stuz!

Already temples to the cruel goddess were being erected.

"I am so sorry, Johnny." Bess-Istra's voice was like the sigh of the southern Trades which blew in from the Pacific; her touch of his hand was tender. Stevens looked up gratefully from his despair.

Bill bit his lip, and forced a grin. He knew, of course, that he was in love with Bess-Istra. And he knew, of course, that she was in love with Stevens. How could she help but be? He wasn't so much of a boy as he had been. There was a new strength about

him. If Bess-Istra had been changed by these astounding events, so had Stevens. He was a man, now. A man whom Bess-Istra loved. Well, to heck with it!

The three humans listened in on the news constantly. Bandro now made a new edict that all power-gliders—and there were millions of them—would be equipped with a device which would make them controllable by the International Police. That is, any power-glider could be sent crashing to Earth by remote control at the will of any Scimitar!

Bill was grim. "The only way for anybody to travel for any great distance is by power-glider. All other vehicles have been scrapped. This means that if an army should get together, if there were ever any rebellion against Bandro's inhuman rule, his Scimitars could stop it—like that! The power-gliders carrying that army would be destroyed!"

But inside, in the back of his mind, an idea was perking. He frowned. But he couldn't draw the thought out.

At the end of the month, every power-glider was equipped with the control device. And now Bandro made an announcement that filled Bill with the wild fire of hope. Bandro and Sab-Hallo were going to make a "good-will" tour of the world. They were going to stop off at various important cities and speak to the people. And they were going to make their tour in the space-ship that had originally brought them to this planet!

Bill snapped his fingers, whirled on Bess-Istra and Stevens.

"I've got it!" he yelled. "Bess-Istra—Johnny—I've got it! We're going to capture the space-ship!"

"Capture the—?" Bess-Istra began blankly. Then her glorious, gold-flecked eyes glowed with savage lights.

"If we but could," she whispered. "Oh, Bill, if we but could! But—"

The Reverend John Stevens shook his head gravely. "No, Bill." His glance was pitying. "We are only three against a world. Three against the International Police! We couldn't—"

"Shut up!" Bill shouted it out. "Listen! There are weapons on our power-glider which can cut through the hardest metals if they are applied close enough, aren't there? We can cut through the hull of the space-ship, get inside, and play hell!"

"But—"

"But nothing, Johnny! Don't you see? *We own the only power-glider in the world that cannot be controlled from a remote distance by the International Police!*"

AND the next day, the power-glider nosed out of the shrouding jungle with its human load. It hovered. But there was no sign that the Scimitars might still be looking for them. It was certain that Bandro thought them dead, their power-glider rusting away, sunk deep in jungle humus.

The glider shot high into the stratosphere. Bill turned its nose southwest. For a half-hour it bored at terrific speed. It was on the trail of the huge space-ship!

"There it is!"

There it was indeed. Miles below them, it plunged along at moderate pace through rolling heaps of storm clouds. It was far above land. It was on its way to San Francisco.

The power glider started to drop. Bill was tense at the controls. In a way this was utterly foolhardy. If the International Police—

"Halt! Give your registration number! Immediately!"

Bill's blood turned cold as the voice came from his tele-radio.

Spinning up toward them came a blunt-nosed Scimitar ship. It was a small ship. The three people could see two Scimitars inside.

Stevens whispered dully, "We'll have to give ourselves up."

"No!" The word came from Bess-Istra. "Bill, this ship is the only one protecting the big ship! If we can—"

"Gotcha!" Bill said huskily. "We'll try, anyway! Hang on!"

He touched the controls. The power-glider plunged headlong at the larger ship. Wind screamed.

"Stop immediately—or you will be stopped!"

Bill's heart was a stone in his breast. The ship had to get close enough. Could they make it?

They did!

The Scimitar ship, of course, depended on its remote control of the down-plunging power-glider. But this was the only power-glider in the world that couldn't be controlled in such a manner. And before the International Police realized that confusing truth, before they got over their surprise that the power-glider had not halted, those International Police were—*dead!*

Bill savagely sprayed the heat-ray over the transparent fore-part of their ship. They burned.

At the last minute, Bill swerved the glider to escape collision. But it had been necessary to get as close as they did, else the heat-ray would have made the Scimitars only pleasantly warm. As it was, behind them the ship was a hurtling torch.

"Praise God!" Stevens whispered shakenly, from his prone position atop Bill. "In his infinite wisdom, the Lord knows that if we die, all hope dies! But now we shall live—shall see the world truly progress toward Utopia!"

"But now we shall live . . ."

Bill was to remember those words.

Bess-Istra whispered joyously, "We have destroyed the space-ship's only protection. There is nothing to stop us, now. Downward, O Bill. Downward!"

And the power-glider dropped downward toward the broad black back of the great space-ship which held Bandro and Sab-Hallo; plunged through a rolling storm-cloud, and in almost complete blackness, landed!

CHAPTER XV

Death of a Great Brain

BILL edged the glider along on the smooth surface until they came to a great round hatch.

"Play the heat beam there and fuse the clasp, and the hatch can be lifted," Bess-Istra whispered. "Hurry, Bill. Oh, hurry!"

The heat-ray speared out. The hasp parted. And in another moment, working amid thunder and lightning, drenched to the skin with plummeting rain, the hatch swung up under Stevens' and Bill's labor.

Bess-Istra raised the glider, sent it silently through the dully lighted aperture. Bill and Stevens dropped through the hatch to the lonely corridor below, pulling the hatch entrance down again.

"Tell me what I must do, O Bill!" Bess-Istra's voice sounded vibrantly. "And I will do anything if I can personally see to it that Sab-Hallo and Bandro get their just deserts!"

Bill grinned to himself. Bess-Istra might have changed, but she wasn't a molly-coddle by any means.

He gave his instructions. Bess-Istra was to float along on the power-glider, close to the ceiling. Bill and Stevens would walk slightly in front, and try to detract attention from the glider. And at the propitious moment, Bess-Istra would blast whoever stood in their way

toward the control room in the nose of the ship.

They started along. Bill's skin crawled. They were in the upper portions of a ship which swarmed with enemies, any one of whom would kill them without mercy. To make it worse, neither Bill nor Stevens had a hand weapon.

Bess-Istra slanted the wings of the glider in toward the body of the ship as they padded down a well-lighted companionway. And just before they reached the bottom two officers of the great ship started up.

The officers looked upward at the two men, blinking. And the angle of their glance was such that they couldn't help but see the glider!

Bill's breath stopped. He halted in mid-step.

The leading officer cried something in his native language. His spastic-gun came out and up. In another moment, Bill and Stevens would have been doubled up in muscle-knotted slumber, had not Bess-Istra acted. The heat-ray flashed out, and human flesh fried, and the two Scimitar officers fell.

With one accord, the two men swooped down and took the spastic-guns. Stevens' face was white, perspiring, but his lips were compressed.

"Atta boy, Johnny!" Bill breathed. "Chin up. You'll see more dead bodies than this before it's over. Come on!"

And there were more dead bodies—a full score, before they finally reached the door of the control room!

But it was the only thing they could do, and they had to act quickly. Bill now drew a deep breath as the guard to the control room, whirled and died and fell. Let out his breath, jerked open the door, and stepped inside.

Bess-Istra and Stevens followed after him. And their presence was unknown until Bill cried ringingly, triumphantly.

"Stick 'em up, fellows. This is the big push—the blow-off! *Quick!*"

THERE were only three men in the control room. One was busily leaning over a map, another was at the controls, the third was at the cabinet of a *tele-eye*. This latter man was—Sab-Hallo!

The other two men turned before Sab-Hallo did. Sab-Hallo faced them slowly, like one who, even in defeat, tries to make a good entrance.

Sab-Hallo whispered, after a bitter moment, "And we thought you dead!"

He locked glances with Bess-Istra, his deadly hatred of her showing there. "You have ever stood in my way," he bit out. "I did your will only until I could step into your place. I did step into your place—"

"—but now shall step out!" Bess-Istra flared. "You, whom I trusted, and even now would wish to reinstate if—"

"*Look out!*"

The cry came from the Reverend John Stevens, a cry of horror.

Bill kept his muscles rigid, tried in a lightning-quick motion of his eyes to take in the whole scene. He saw the pilot of the ship, ignored up to now, draw a weapon. His evident intention was to kill Bess-Istra.

Bill moved his spastic-gun through a tiny arc, woodenly depressed the trigger. The spastic beams leaped out, seizing the fellow's heart-muscle with invisible fingers, throttling it, causing it to stop its beat. The man fell.

Sab-Hallo screamed at that moment. His face contorted. He was like a broad-shouldered, squat gorilla as he leaped toward Bess-Istra, long arms outstretched. Bill did not have time to regain his balance. Bess-Istra was knocked backward to the floor, and the squat scientist, utterly maddened, rav-

ened for her throat.

It was Stevens whose gun danced with tiny lights this time. The vibrations bathed the scientist's head, paralyzed his great brain. He rolled over, eyes staring upward sightlessly. For the brain, unconsciously, controls the life-mechanism of all parts of the body. Sab-Hallo was dead. . . .

Bill scooped Bess-Istra to her feet. She immediately regained possession of her senses.

"The rest of the men in the ship!" she cried. "We must make sure—"

She darted for the control board of the great ship, lifted a panel, depressed a stud.

"The sleep-gas!" she uttered triumphantly. "It will spread everywhere through the ship except to the control room. Oh, Bill—Johnny—we have won! The ship is ours. We can control it from this room, can go everywhere, invincible, impregnable, and shall seize all my disloyal men. Peace—real peace, this time—shall come to the planet Earth and shall endure!"

Her eyes were glorified with her happiness; was reflected in those of Stevens. And Bill himself understood the great thing that had happened. He felt a lump in his throat. The adventures they had gone through had been mad, mad. But it had all been for a purpose. They were here, the three of them who had seen so much of the great change—here, safe and alive!

There was no more danger, no more cause for alarm. It was hard to believe. But it was true! Sab-Hallo was dead. And their worst enemy, Bandro, was at this moment chained in slumber somewhere in the rest of the ship—

"Fools!" a voice grated. "So you thought to return, to take from me the reins of power!"

The three people turned with varying degrees of speed to face—Bandro!

BILL'S high hopes fell, like a boulder shoved over the brink of a sheer precipice; fell and splintered into a million pain-bringing shards.

He was held rooted, part of a tableau which existed for the better part of a minute.

Then Bess-Istra's voice, lifeless, weary, sounded: "We thought you to be in the other part of the ship—sleeping, helpless."

The world-tyrant laughed with mocking intonations.

"And so I would have been," he sneered, "had I not entered the control room while you were so busy with Sab-Hallo. I waited until an opportune moment—waited until you had convinced yourselves that you had succeeded in your purpose. And had you not been so busy with congratulating yourselves on a bold enterprise, it may have been that I would not have you at the point of a gun now."

"The moral being," Bill murmured numbly, "that you shouldn't cross your bridges before they're hatched. What's the pay-off?"

"Pay-off? Ah, yes. The pay-off is that you die!"

Bill said, "As I suspected. So as the white hope of the world, we're complete flops, eh?"

He laughed harshly, with a self-loathing that he did not bother to conceal. "Well, pal, if you insist on having fun, let's get it over with. I can't stand living with myself much longer!"

He meant it. He had been in tough situations before. But always there had been some way out. Some slight chance of surcease. Here there was none. Bandro was too alert, too conscious of the fact that on the deaths of these three people rested all his hopes of future power. Bandro would not be caught napping. Nor was he going to waste any time in the vainglorious

braggadocio which is usually the resort of the callow victor. He was going to sear them with destroying flame—now!

Bandro was holding two guns. Bill used to have trouble identifying the innumerable weapons these people from the stars had brought with them, but he recognized these as a particularly virulent type of heat-ray. Nope, not a chance!

Bandro's trigger fingers started to tense. Bill braced himself for momentary cutting agony, and in his last moments thought of Bess-Istra. . . .

"Stay! In the name of the Lord our God, I command it!"

Bill's head whipped around toward Stevens so fast he almost jerked it loose.

"Johnny!" he gasped. "For cryin' out loud, you can't—"

But the Reverend John Stevens, his eyes flashing with a godly fire, fearlessly stepped from the line and walked toward those guns which were just about to expel their deadly fires!

CHAPTER XVI

He Saved the World!

BANDRO'S eyes bulged. He made a choking sound. He stiffened.

"And in the name of the Goddess Stuz, fool," he bit out, "*stay where you are!*"

The Reverend John Stevens stopped, but his head was held high. His voice was clear, his meaning plain.

"My God does not recognize the Goddess Stuz, unless she be Lucifer in disguise. And Stuz is helpless before Him, or before His servant."

Bill felt a shock of unbelief. For Bandro stood with slack jaw, sweat suddenly leaping to his face. His gunhand trembled visibly. Stevens took one more step forward, his expression se-

rene, confident. Bandro stumbled back a step. A tremendous battle was evident on his face.

He cried in a tone of terrible wrath. "Move back—stop! I'll blast you!"

And:

"You dare not blast me," the young missionary replied. "The Lord will not permit us to die, when our mission is so great. *You will hand me your weapons.*"

Bill felt as if he were witnessing a miracle. Stevens might have been a saint, haloed, holding a radiant cross out before him, exorcising an evil spirit. For it was evident that Bandro was helplessly demoralized! Stevens was walking toward him, one hand outstretched to take the weapons. And Bandro was going to give them to him! Or was he?

Almost it worked.

But it didn't. At the last moment, the hypnotic spell in which Stevens held Bandro was dispersed. Perhaps the motion Stevens made toward the weapons was too sudden. But Bandro—fired!

Bill hardly knew what happened. He yelled. He plunged forward, saw Stevens fall, doubling up; but Bandro's attention could not be turned back to Bill fast enough to keep Bill from tangling with him. And Bill *did* tangle with him!

Bandro's weapons went flying as Bill struck them from his hands. Bandro went bowling backward as Bill's fist connected with his chin. Went bowling backward, and smashed against the instrument panel of the great ship.

Bill caught a vague glimpse of Bess-Istra. She was looking with shocked glance at the heap of human flesh that was the Reverend Johnny Stevens. Then Bandro had rolled toward him again, face twisted in a scream of rage.

Bill smashed against a wall, was held

spread-eagled there a moment. And in that moment, his blood froze.

IN THE vision screen above the instrument panel was the swiftly approaching Atlantic Ocean. Bandro's collision with the instrument board had changed the course of the great ship, and now it was plummeting at terrific speed toward the bosom of the broad sea below!

It was going to strike that heaving surface, was going to be immersed—and rushing tons of water would flow through the hatch that Bill had opened.

Unless—Bill drew a deep breath, growled. He met Bandro's charge with the merciless purpose of a beast—to kill, and kill quickly. His fingers wrapped around Bandro's throat. He bore the man to the floor. Bandro's breath was hot on his face. Bandro's eyes bulged. Almost he succeeded in throwing Bill off. But Bill hung on, insensately, and finally dragged Bandro to his feet.

"Traitor!" Bill gritted.

He flung Bandro halfway across the control room. Bandro spun, twisted, smashed against the bulkhead, and sagged in a lifeless heap.

Bill stood over him, panting. But Bandro would never get up. Bandro's neck was broken. Bandro, tyrant of Earth, was dead.

Bill's head turned dazedly toward the vision screen. His brain awoke to life at last. The ship was so close to the ocean that Bill could see whitecaps.

In another second he was over the instrument board, panting, praying fervently. But he could make nothing of that hodge-podge of controls. It was hopeless. They were going to strike!

He whirled. "Bess-Istra!" he yelled. "The—"

But she was there, bending over the panel. She touched at buttons and fin-

ger-sized switches, her hands moving hurriedly. And just as the ship seemed certain to dip beneath the waves, Bess-Istra brought its nose up and sent it boring at a steep angle into the clouds.

In another minute, Bill was trembling with violent relief. The ship was sailing smoothly, controls locked.

Bess-Istra quickly turned from the instrument panel, with a numb expression. She stood over the Reverend John Stevens. Suddenly she crumpled up over him, and her sobs sounded rackingly through the ship.

Bill dropped to his knees, too, looking at the charred spot where a death-dealing ray had burned a hole through the missionary's head. Bill looked and couldn't believe it.

"Johnny," he said in a low, strained voice. "Johnny, you old son-of-a-gun! Wake up. It ain't true. It's all over. We've won. Sab-Hallo's dead. Bandro is dead. We've got a ship that nobody on Earth can stand up against. Everything that you wanted on Earth—peace and good will toward men, and so forth—why, Johnny, they're just beginning, see? The war's over! There's no reason for you to die at a time like this. Particularly when if it hadn't been for you we'd all be dead, and all hope would be dead—" He stopped, choking, eyes blurred.

Bess-Istra's head raised. She was blurred to Bill's sight.

"Say no more," she choked. "For Johnny is— Oh, Bill, Johnny is no more! And he was so brave, and so true, and I loved him so!"

BILL bowed his head. He bit at his lip. He said nothing. The Reverend John Stevens—like Another—had sacrificed himself for humanity.

But finally he raised Bess-Istra's shaking body erect, drew her close against him while she sobbed out her

grief—sobbed, not like a terrible woman from the stars, but like a girl of Earth whose heart is broken with pain unbearable.

Bill kept his eyes wide, his vision straight on the vision screen and the clouds through which the ship was sweeping. Well, it was all over now. All over. There were some loose ends to gather up; Bess-Istra would be made dictator of the world again because, after all, where could you get a better ruler? And Bill would report back to his boss at the New York Corey Features Syndicate and forever forget Bess-Istra.

Forget Bess-Istra! *Oh, God, I don't want to forget her. I want her for myself—*

"You loved him very much," Bill said gently.

"Because he was so good," she sobbed. "I loved him—as I would my own child, Bill—as I would a brother—"

Bill's arms tightened around her glorious body. He smiled. A great song of joy mingled with sadness beat in his pulses.

And she raised her swimming eyes to his, her lip trembling.

"Bill," she said huskily. "Bill. What—what do you think of me? Am I good?—or am I bad? Am I never to be forgiven for the terrible things I did on that other world?"

Bill touched tenderly at her eyes, as

if he could draw away the fright that showed there.

"Johnny Stevens would know the answer to that, Bess-Istra," he whispered. "Answer the question for yourself. Think back on what you've done on this world. You've stepped on a bunch of reptiles who didn't give a hoot for human life. Hitler, Tojo, Mussolini. Whatever you may have done in a past that is probably billions of years distant, it's nothing to the good that you've done here. Remember that, Mistress Bess; remember it!"

Her hands tightened on his shoulders. The fright was gone from her gold-flecked eyes. She breathed, "Yes, Bill—oh, yes! I will remember. And I will remember that there is so much to do before people are completely happy—so much. Bill!"

"Yes," he whispered huskily.

She did not answer. The tips of her fingers touched with infinite tenderness at the side of his face. A smile trembled on her perfect lips. In her moist eyes there was a light that Bill had vainly been hoping to see. He grew dizzy with the sight of it. He drew her lips to his and thrilled to her response; held her close and knew that she was his.

As the ship of peace thundered over a world that soon would go mad with joy at the release from all terrors, those two stood locked in close embrace, savoring the first ecstasy of a life that was to be rich indeed.

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THE MAN WHO MURDERED HIMSELF

by DUNCAN FARNSWORTH

SOMETIMES," Interplanetary Inspector Carson told the silent room, "I wish I had myself a nice quiet sane job driving a space truck. This streamlined deduction is enough to drive a guy whacky."

Gloomily, he inspected the paper weight in his hand. The thing was a curio, an antique—a small, fat little elephant encased in glassicade and bearing the legend "GOP CONVENTION, 1940". Carson turned it over in his hand, regarding it wistfully.

"Wish I was back five centuries," he mused. "The boys had it easy then, if they'd only known it. Perry Mason, Nero Wolfe, Nick Carter, yeah, even Sherlock Holmes—what a snap they had!"

He sighed heavily, and pushed a button on his desk. In an instant the light below his telaboard glowed crimson, and the cherubic face of Brisk Haynes, his assistant, appeared.

"Yeah, Chief," Haynes said cheerfully. "Ready to go?"

Carson sighed again. "Might as well. Haven't figured out a single angle but we might as well." He rubbed the bald spot on the back of his head.

"Meet me on the roof runway." He flicked the button, and the face of his assistant disappeared. . . .

"The way I see it . . ." Brisk Haynes began, when he and Carson were comfortably seated on the space train headed for Los Angeles.

"There's only one way to see it," Carson cut in dourly. "We haven't got a thing on this bird. We can go to the house, yeah. We can make a check, yeah. We can ask questions, yeah. But we don't find out anything. And all on account of this damned streamlined world. A bunch of idle rich are having a party in this fellow Dole's home. They're drinking pretty heavy, sopping up an imported brand of planet punch, and someone gets the bright idea that they should play games."

Haynes remained expectantly wordless, although he knew the case as well as his Chief.

"This guy Dole," Carson continued, "is Corporate President of Spaceways Science Institute. He remembers that his company has developed a new wrinkle which they've been going to put on the market. It's built around that recent body-switching thing-a-ma-jig."

A man was dead. You couldn't say he had murdered himself. That's just suicide. But what if the man wasn't really "himself"?



"Yeah," Haynes agreed. "It's been scientifically accepted for nearly a year."

"Scientifically accepted," Carson mimicked. "Damn, how I hate that phrase. It's so typical of this day and age. They develop a whosis that'll enable two people to switch bodies and no one even bats an eye over it. Just take it for granted—like that." He snapped his fingers.

"What's eating you, Chief?" Haynes asked bewilderedly.

Carson glowered at his assistant. He fished into his pocket and brought forth the tiny elephant curio.

"This thing," he said, "has made me sick. It's made me realize whatta snap the dicks had back then. Science, high-gear living. Bah, I'm getting sick of it."

Haynes remained silent, but grinned inwardly. His Chief was probably the keenest scientific Inspector in the Interplanetary Police. These periodic outbursts in which he longed for the return of "the good old days" were just a steam outlet for him.

"So," Carson went on, stuffing the curio back in his pocket. "This guy Dole—like I say—remembers that his company has made some pretty snappy strides in this body switching stuff. A perfect party game for the idle rich, see? Give them a thrill. Let them fool around with something that's been only used scientifically up until now."

Haynes nodded. "Uhhuh."

"He calls his laboratories in New York," Carson continued. "In an hour they've got all the necessary equipment out in Los Angeles, so that Dole and his ritzy chums can switch their pie-eyed bodies around for an evening's entertainment." He grimaced. "Great stuff, letting stinkos like them fool around with that sort of thing."

"Must have been some brawl,"

Haynes mused. "I'd kind of like to try it myself. Think of me in another body."

"Skip it," Carson said caustically. "It's bad enough as it is. Then he added: "And, incidentally, there won't be any more of that sort of thing. Not after what happened. I got in touch with Earth Commissioner this morning and got him to put a ban on the body-switch business for any purposes other than science experimentation."

"Kill joy," Haynes growled.

"I was summing up the case," Carson said acidly. "So, to get on with it, they get this body-switch business going at the party. It's great stuff. Mrs. Rujerfitt has a swell time running around in the body of Mr. Muchdough. Hilarious and all that. Up to a certain point. And that point is when they come to switch back bodies."

"They all got their own bodies back," Haynes put in.

"Yeah, all but Dole and another guy—a fella named Sturgess. They're walking up on the roof garden part of the time. Both of them are tanked. Dole is in Sturgess' body, and Sturgess is in Dole's. That's when Sturgess, in Dole's body, decides to walk the ledge on the roof. Dole, in the body of Sturgess, bets him he can't."

"Well?" Haynes knew the answer, but he also knew he was supposed to ask.

"He can't," Carson remarked tersely. "While he's weaving along the edge, he falls off."

Haynes frowned. "Dammit, now I'm mixed up. *Who* falls off?"

"Sturgess falls off," Carson said. "Sturgess in Dole's body. And that's the end of Sturgess, and of Dole's body. That's how come Sturgess and Dole don't get a chance to switch back. That's how come Dole is stuck with his chum's body right now. That's how

come we gotta run our legs off making an investigation—because Dole, in Sturgess' body, pulls wires with the Commissioner to have the thing certified and cleared."

Haynes sighed. "Now I'm twice as muddled."

"Then wait till we're there," Carson answered. . . .

CARSON and Haynes entered the luxurious study of Martin Dole several hours later. They had been admitted by a squat, Venusian house-boy who disappeared, leaving them alone in the room.

"Some joint," Haynes remarked. "Wish I was one of the idle rich. If I was, I'd retire, take me an interplanetary cruise ship and find some nice—"

"I've been here once before," Carson broke in. He was looking at the bookcases, at the trophies and knick-knacks along the tops of them. "Used to know Dole's old man before he died a few years back." He frowned. "Never thought his worthless son would get himself into this kind of a mess. But that's this str—"

"Streamlined world," Haynes finished for him, grinning.

Carson glowered, removing his coat and placing it along the back of a chair.

"Didn't see young Dole's wife around. She must be going a bit daffy over it all."

"Wouldn't blame her," Haynes began. "I know if I—"

He was interrupted by the sound of the door behind them being opened. They both wheeled, to see a tall, blond moustached fellow standing there. He was dressed in an ill-fitting smoking robe.

"How do you do," he said. "You're Carson, I believe?" He spoke to Carson in a jerky fashion, and his face

was strained.

"This is Haynes, my assistant," Carson replied. "And I take it that you're Martin Dole."

The tall blond nodded. "Yes, but looking a bit differently since the tragedy."

"You mean that the body you happen to be wearing at the moment happened to have once belonged to a fellow named Sturgess, eh?"

Dole nodded, and sat down gesturing Carson and Haynes to chairs across from him.

"Yeah," Carson's voice contained no sympathy. "I know all about it. Some party, eh?"

The lines on Dole's face—or, rather, on Sturgess'—grew tighter, and he gulped nervously. He looked like a man on the point of a complete breakdown.

"We were drinking heavily," he said. His voice was husky. "I never would have hit on such an idea if we hadn't been. I realize now how foolish, how horrible—"

"But it's too late now," Carson broke in calmly. "Perhaps you can tell us what happened on the roof."

Dole seemed to take a grip on himself.

"You'll excuse my state of nerves, gentlemen," he began. "This having a different body, plus the fact that your very best friend was killed through your own foolishness, can play hell with you." His hands trembled slightly. Then:

"It was after our switching of bodies. As I said, I'd been—we all had been—drinking heavily. Sturgess and I decided to take a breath of air up on the roof. He was in my body and I was in his."

Carson nodded. "Obviously. You still are."

"Well," Dole went on, "we were

alone up there, kidding one another rather drunkenly about the deficiencies of our respective bodies. I told him that being in his body made me realize how fine my own body was, and all that sort of thing. He said that my body couldn't stand liquor as well as his. He said he'd prove it by walking the ledge. We were drunk. I let him. He fell!" Dole's last words seemed to have been husked from him, and he put his head in his hands, shaking.

"He fell," Carson echoed, "in your body. You were left, trapped in the body of Sturgess, so to speak."

Dole nodded. "I have to have this thing cleared up. My wife and all my friends know, of course. And I don't see how we can keep from unfavorable publicity. But I must go on—even though I've a different body now. I had the Commissioner send you down here to give the accident as clean a bill of health as possible. You can talk to any other people who were at the party, if you'd like. But, somehow, things have to be regulated. I have to go on—" his words trailed off lamely.

CARSON rose.

"It won't be necessary to talk to any of them. Got in touch with six or seven by telaboard this morning. Their stories seem the same. Sturgess' death was undoubtedly an accident. You're right about the publicity, there'll be plenty of it. I'm sorry, for I knew your father. But you have it coming to you."

Dole nodded.

"I know I have." His voice was a half sob.

Carson had advanced to the book-cases, was reaching for his coat, which he'd thrown over a chair, when he paused. He picked a tiny knife off the shelf, turning it over in his hands.

"An odd piece," he remarked. "You

must have been a collector, like your father."

Dole nodded.

"I got that in Titan," he acknowledged. "Picked up most of that stuff during my interplanetary travels."

Carson nodded, eyes searching the shelf until he reached out and brought down a tiny earthen mug. He held it out.

"This, too, I suppose?"

"Yes," Dole acknowledged. "Picked up that piece while I was on a trip through Juno." He seemed suddenly impatient, and a little puzzled.

Carson picked up his coat, started to turn, then reached for the shelf once more.

"Say," he murmured, "this thing is really odd," he held out a piece to Dole. "Where did you get this?"

Haynes, who had been waiting at the door, started to say something, then clamped his jaws.

Dole had risen. He looked at the object Carson held in his hands.

"Oh that," he shrugged. "It has a little value. Got it on a trip through Venus. It was given to me by an old—"

But Dole got no farther. Carson had drawn an atomic pistol from inside his coat.

"Hold that so-and-so!" he snapped to Haynes. "We'll need him for the murder of Martin Dole!"

Haynes acted quickly, and after a brief scuffle, had the prisoner in handcuffs. . . .

CARSON and Haynes were on the space train, heading home from Los Angeles. Now and then Carson's assistant looked at him with a sort of speculative awe.

"That was a neat trick, Chief," Haynes said at last. "But how in the hell did you dope it out?"

Carson finished lighting a rank Venusian cigar.

"Simple," he grunted. "When I got in touch with the rich rascals who'd been at Dole's party, I found out that there was a certain vagueness about the events during and after the body-switching. They were all so drunk that everything was hazy, and anything would have gone by them without their knowing it. Then, too, the accident on the roof seemed too pat."

Haynes nodded.

"So a little checking on the telaboard revealed that this Sturgess guy was nuts about Dole's wife, and vice-versa. Sturgess didn't have much dough, so he couldn't take Dole's wife and keep her in any style. She's expensive. The body-switch gave them their chance."

"Yeah, but—" Haynes began.

"As I was saying," Carson glared. "The body switch gave them their chance. Sturgess and Dole's wife had stayed pretty sober."

"Sturgess was clever. Clever enough to know that such a wild scheme might work. So he and Dole didn't switch bodies. While Dole was drunk, Sturgess—pretending that he'd switched with Dole—took Dole up on the roof and pushed him off."

"But they hadn't changed?"

"Of course not. Only the people at the party thought that they had. They

thought that Dole was in the body of Sturgess. But he wasn't. It was Sturgess just as he'd always been. However, he pretended to be Dole, now."

"But how—" Haynes began.

"Willya listen?" Carson barked. "Sturgess was smart, he knew almost everything about Dole. Everything down to tiny personal habits. He must have suspected we were trying to trap him when I forced him to identify the knick-knacks on the mantel. Only Dole would be able to do so, and remember them rightly."

"But didn't Sturgess identify them?" Haynes asked. "Those first ones, I mean?"

Carson shrugged.

"How in the hell do I know? He was probably making it up as he went along. But when I showed him this," Carson dug into his pocket and pulled forth a tiny object, "and he pretended to remember where he'd gotten it, I knew it was Sturgess and not Dole."

Haynes looked at the little curio in Carson's palm. An antique, a little elephant encased in glasscade. It bore the legend, "GOP CONVENTION, 1940."

Carson sighed.

"They had it soft in those days—Nero Wolfe, Perry Mason, yeah, and even Sherlock Holmes!"

The End.

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